Alternative Data

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/4993399.

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning: No Archive Warnings Apply
Category: Gen
Fandom: Star Trek: The Next Generation
Character: Data (Star Trek), Geordi La Forge, Jean-Luc Picard, Deanna Troi, William Riker, Reginald Barclay, Ihat, Lal (Star Trek), Tasha (AU), Guinan, Beverly Crusher, Worf, Harpo Marx, Chico Marx, Groucho Marx, Admiral Haftel, Korgano, Masaka

Additional Tags: Alternate Universe, Asperger Syndrome, NVLD, Mythology - Freeform, Trickster Archetypes, Electronic Consciousness, Silicate Lifeforms, Emotion Chip, Gender and Identity, Transcending Labels

Stats: Published: 2016-08-26 Updated: 2018-09-30 Chapters: 35/? Words: 87629

Alternative Data

by RowenaZahnrei

Summary

Trapped on an alternate Enterprise, LtCmdr Danny 'Data' Soong is desperate to return to his universe and his family. But, when an ancient artificial consciousness infiltrates the Enterprise computer and physically alters the bridge officers, Danny and Data will find themselves challenging what it means to be 'human' while fighting to contain the Ihat virus.

Now featuring an incredible cover image by orangeinterlude! :D

This story is a work in progress. Your feedback would be deeply appreciated! :)

Notes

Disclaimer: I will admit that my character Danny Soong is a manifestation of me coming to terms with my Asperger's (as well as a heartfelt tribute intended to honor how watching Data learn how to interact socially and become a leader in his own right and in his own way has helped me learn to read facial expressions, navigate social situations, and pursue my own goals from kindergarten on), but I do not own Star Trek: The Next Generation or any of the characters therein. As for the Marx Brothers, I don't own their stuff either (unless DVDs and books count). Like the Beatles in my "Doctor Who and the Nowhere Men" story, the Marx Brothers in this story are based on the fictionalized characters they depicted in their movies, TV and radio appearances, writings, etc., not the actual characters they were in real life. Please don't sue me or steal my story. Thanks! :)

Behold the beautiful fanart, created for this story by orangeinterlude!
Thank you so much! :D :D :D
Lieutenant Commander Data strode purposefully into the transporter room of the small Starfleet base. The young Atrean ensign in charge of the transporter controls looked up, then smiled.

"Did you enjoy your leave, Commander?"

It took Data a moment to respond. Ensign Igmar noticed the commander's expression seemed forced, as though he were making a conscious effort to appear calm and composed. When he finally spoke, his voice had the same forced calmness as his face.

Igmar's smile quickly dropped to an expression of concern.

"Yes. Yes, Ensign," he said. "It was very good to have a chance to see my mother again. Particularly after such a harrowing experience."

"But something's wrong," Igmar blurted. "It's not just your experience with the Borg."

Data stared at her. She felt herself blushing at her forwardness, but she had to go on.

"I don't mean to pry, Commander, but you seem so, well, reserved this morning. Not at all like your usual self. Even when you first arrived on Atrea, you were not so...withdrawn."

"Is it that obvious?"

Data shook his head, then offered her a very slight smile.

"I should have known better than to try to conceal my emotions. Commander Riker is always telling me I need to work on my poker face."

He took a deep, shaky breath. As he did, his eyes started to brim with tears. He blinked hard, then turned to Ensign Igmar.

"My father," he explained. "He had been unwell for so long. I should have expected..."

He stopped, took another shaky breath, then began again.

"My father is dead," he explained in a flat, matter-of-fact tone. "I can only comfort myself with the gratitude I feel that I was able to say good-bye, and to be there to comfort my mother. His funeral was yesterday."

He sniffed sharply, then rubbed his nose.

"I apologize, Ensign. I did not mean to trouble you with my personal concerns. If you would be so good as to operate the controls, I am ready to beam back to the Enterprise."
Yvette Igmar looked at him standing there, and her heart went out to him.

"Oh, Commander, I am so sorry. First the Borg and now this. And poor Dr. O'Donnell. Your parents and mine have been neighbors for so long. I should go see her."

"I believe my mother would appreciate that, Ensign. Thank you for your concern."

Ensign Igmar could feel herself blushing again and looked down at her control board. As she did, a red light began to flash.

"Commander, the Enterprise is hailing you."

"Oh, yes. I must have forgotten to reactivate my communicator after the service. Thank you, Ensign."

Data slapped the combadge on his chest.

"Data to Enterprise."

"Commander," came Captain Picard's cultured voice, "we have been trying to reach you. Are you ready to beam aboard?"

"I am, sir."

"Good. Then please meet me in my ready room once you have settled in. Our new orders have just arrived from Starfleet and I wish to discuss them with you."

"I am on my way, sir."

"Oh, and Commander..."

"Yes, sir?"

"I am very sorry to hear about your father. I do hope your mother-"

Ensign Igmar watched, her heart aching with sympathy, as Data squeezed his eyes shut, then slowly opened them again.

"She is fine, Captain. My father had been ill for a very long time. He was in a great deal of pain. She has chosen to try to see his death as a blessing, rather than as a tragedy."

"She is a very brave woman, your mother."

"Yes, Captain. I know. And I am pleased to hear you sounding so well."

"Yes. Thank you, Data. I spent my leave with my brother and his family. It was quite a...healing experience. Well, I will await your arrival at your convenience. Picard out."

Data stepped up onto the transporter platform and turned to face Ensign Igmar.

"Perhaps I will see you on my next leave, Ensign."

"I'll be here, sir."

"Good-bye, then, Yvette."

Yvette had to hold her breath to still her reaction. He knew her first name. She breathed deeply to
slow her racing heart. She'd had a crush on Data Soong since she had first seen him five years ago, that perfect summer day the year before she'd entered Starfleet Academy. He'd been spending his leave visiting his parents, as he usually did, and had helped her repair her bicycle's back tire. Bicycles were admittedly primitive vehicles, but they remained enormously popular among Atrean youth.

She sighed. Such a shame he was already married.

"Good-bye, sir," she said, forcing herself to sound businesslike and professional. "Preparing for transport."

She activated the transporter beam and watched as the slender man dematerialized into innumerable sparkles of light and energy. She had just glanced at her control monitor to confirm his safe arrival on the Enterprise when her own combadge sounded.

"Enterprise to Atrean Starfleet Base. We are still waiting to receive Commander Soong."

A wave of panic rushed over her. They hadn't received him? That was impossible. There was no way the transporter could have malfunctioned. She had plotted the coordinates correctly; the Enterprise should have received him without a problem.

"This is Ensign Igmar. Lt. Commander Soong beamed over to Transporter Room Three barely fifteen seconds ago. He must be there."

"Commander Soong has not rematerialized on board the Enterprise. Please check your pattern buffer to ensure the transport cycle was completed."

Ensign Igmar bristled at the man's tone, but her fingers fairly flew across her board as she checked and rechecked her transporter records. They all read that the cycle had been successfully completed. Lt. Commander Daniel 'Data' Soong had rematerialized aboard the U.S.S. Enterprise 1701-D at 1043 hours, Atrean time. She told the Enterprise so, then demanded that a full inquiry be made into Data's disappearance.

Twelve hours later, after an extensive and grueling examination of all systems, Data's best friend – and possibly the best engineering mind in Starfleet – Lt. Commander Geordi La Forge, was forced to make the pronouncement. His voice was husky with emotion as he reported to the stunned Enterprise command crew, "I'm afraid he's gone, sirs. Lt. Commander Data Soong has been lost."

Yvette couldn't believe her ears. She looked down at her hands, the hands responsible for operating the controls that had killed him, and sank to her knees. La Forge came over to her and placed a kindly hand on her shoulder.

"It wasn't your fault, Ensign. You did everything right. I can't for the life of me figure out what went wrong, or why!"

"Oh, Commander La Forge," Yvette sobbed. "What am I going to tell his mother now? She just lost her husband, and now I have to tell her that her only son is dead! And what of his wife and daughter?"

"I don't know, Ensign," La Forge said. "But I will promise you this. We'll get to the bottom of this tragedy if I have to devote the rest of my career to doing it!"

To Be Continued...
References include TNG episodes "Brothers," "Family," "Inheritance," and "Best of Both Worlds."
Chapter Two

Lt. Commander Data materialized in Transporter Room Three, only to find the room deserted and the lights dimmed, as if his arrival had not been expected. Many of the regular crew were still on leave, though, so he didn't let it worry him. He was too preoccupied with his own thoughts. Walking swiftly, he left the transporter room and headed for the turbolift, planning to deposit his travel bag in his quarters before reporting to the captain as ordered.

"Deck Eight," he said.

The turbolift doors opened to a corridor that seemed, somehow, different than he remembered. But no, there was the same pale blue carpet, the same rows of terra cotta doors. Shaking off the odd feeling, Data strode the familiar route to his door, only to stop just short of slamming into it.

"Computer, unlock door!" he said.

"An authorization code is required to override the privacy lock," the computer stated.

"What do you—" Data started, then blinked in alarm. The names on the door… Lts. Ann and Alan Hildebrant…

A wave of disorientation swept over him and he spun around, looking up and down the corridor.

"Computer, what deck is this?"

"Deck Eight," the computer replied.

"Locate the Soong family's quarters."

"There is no Soong family registered."

"Not registered!" he exclaimed. "Computer, where the hell are my quarters!"

"Voice print identified. Lt. Commander Data, your quarters are located on Deck Two, room 3653."

"Deck Two…?"

Data frowned. Squeezing the strap of his travel case, he strode back to the turbolift and instructed it to take him straight to the bridge. He knew the Enterprise had been in dire need of repair after its face-off with the Borg in Sector 001, but he could not believe that a refit extensive enough to necessitate the actual relocation of officers' quarters could have been carried out in only three weeks.

The turbolift came to a nearly imperceptible stop and the doors slid smoothly open. Data stepped out onto a bridge manned by totally unfamiliar people; most likely new transfers. Fighting to reign in his temper, he stepped up to the young officer standing at the tactical station.

"Excuse me, Lieutenant, but I—" he began, only to blink and step back as the officer advanced on him.
"Who are you?" the man demanded. "I don't remember being informed that anyone was expected to arrive on board this morning."

Data straightened, meeting the officer glare for glare.

"What is this, an interrogation? I was scheduled to arrive last night, but Captain Picard granted me an extension because of the funeral-"

"The funeral? Why didn't you say so?"

The security officer's entire menacing demeanor changed. His steely gray eyes filled with compassion and his voice softened considerably.

"Then you want the Officer's Lounge at Ten Forward. That's where you'll find Captain Picard. Do you require an escort, sir?"

The question caught Data a bit off balance. This officer clearly didn't recognize him, which was very strange. Data was Second Officer aboard the Enterprise, Chief of Operations, the third in command after the captain and Commander Riker. Even a newly transferred officer should have recognized him, especially a security officer.

"No, I believe I can find my way," he said.

"Allow me to offer my condolences, sir. Were you a friend of the deceased?"

Data stepped into the turbolift and regarded the security officer, wondering how he had ever made it to the rank of lieutenant.

"You might say that. I was his son."

The turbolift doors closed on the security officer's stunned expression. Data shook his head. He would have to speak to the captain about that man's bridge assignment.

The doors to Ten Forward seemed familiar enough, but as he approached them he heard upbeat music and chatter wafting into the corridor. A strange, surreal feeling crept over him.

"What is going on here?" he asked out loud, to no one in particular. To his surprise, the computer answered.

"The function in Ten Forward is a memorial reception for Lieutenant Commander Data."

"What?!" Data exclaimed. "A memorial reception? But, there must be a misunderstanding. I'm not dead. My father is!"

He shook his head, the strap of his bag digging painfully into his palm.

"Has the whole universe gone mad today? Or, perhaps this is some kind of practical joke? If it is, let me assure you that I am not laughing."

"Humor is not a part of my program," the computer informed him.

"Oh, shut up," Data snapped. "You sound like one of my father's prototype androids!"

He charged into the room, intent on locating the captain and getting some answers. After only a few purposeful steps, however, his charge changed into an amazed sort of wandering stroll as he observed the party raging in the crowded room.
White and black balloons were everywhere, as were hundreds of pure white, sweet-scented lilies. Data spotted Commander Riker standing before a small gathering of seated musicians on a raised platform in the center of the room playing his trombone with such intensity and passion that he seemed oblivious to everything but his music. The sounds of jazz, laughter, and tinkling glasses filled the air. Data stopped his movement and stood as if rooted to the spot.

"I can't believe it," he said, his eyes wide with the effort of taking it all in. "They think I'm dead and they're having a party?"

The crowd parted for a moment and Data was able to spot the distinguished features of Captain Picard. The captain stood by one of the many viewport windows that made Ten Forward such a popular recreational area talking quietly with Dr. Beverly Crusher, Counselor Deanna Troi, Lt. Worf, and Chief Engineer Geordi La Forge. They all seemed slightly more careworn than he remembered, particularly Deanna, who was dressed in a blue Starfleet uniform rather than the more informal outfit she usually wore.

Data carefully pushed his way through the crowd. No one gave him a more than cursory glance and no one seemed to recognize him, though he recognized a few of them. When he was within earshot of the group's conversation, he stopped his advance, deciding it would probably be better to listen in for a while before approaching the group directly.

"Yes, Geordi, I do think Data would have approved," Counselor Troi was saying to the morose engineer.

Dr. Crusher nodded.

"I agree," she said. "After all, this is exactly the kind of reception Data set up when we all thought that you and Ro were dead. He said it best himself then: he wanted to celebrate your lives rather than mourn your deaths. I think he would want us to do the same for him."

"Quite right, Doctor," the captain said. "Geordi, Data couldn't have asked for a better funeral."

Geordi smiled sadly.

"Thanks, Captain. But, I still can't shake the feeling that all this is premature. I mean, maybe it's just my own experience, being phased and cloaked while everyone around me believed I was dead, but I keep thinking there's got to be more we can do, something we're missing. The system failure struck so suddenly…it's—" He sighed and hung his head. "It's just so hard for me to accept that he's really gone, you know? I always thought..."

"That he would outlive us all," Deanna finished his thought.

The small group nodded and turned their gaze to the starfield before them.

Data understood now, all too well. These people were truly hurting over the loss of their dear friend. And, what was more, he was certain that, although these people looked, talked, and acted like his own friends, he had never met them before.

Feeling overwhelmed, and more than a little frightened, Data drew back into the crowd – until a sharp tap on his shoulder made him jump nearly out of his skin.

"I'm sorry," he exclaimed, grabbing onto a nearby table to keep from stumbling backwards.

"No, it's my fault for startling you," said a calm voice.
Data looked up and his eyes widened with recognition.

"Guinan?"

"Yes, that's right. I run Ten Forward. I was just coming over to ask if you'd like a drink. You seemed to need one."

Data stared at her, wondering if she knew who he was. The Guinan he knew could always perceive whenever something out of the ordinary was taking place aboard the Enterprise. He hoped this Guinan was the same way.

"Why don't you step over to the bar," she invited him with a small wave of her hand. "You look like someone who needs to talk. And, as anyone here will tell you, I'm an excellent listener."

"Thank you," he said gratefully, following her through the chattering crowd toward the bar at the opposite end of the room. By some amazing stroke of luck, there was a free stool right at the end of the bar where he and Guinan could converse in relative privacy. He took a seat as Guinan poured a green liquid into a shot glass, then slid it over to him.

Data looked it over, then took a deep sniff. He looked up at Guinan quizzically.

"What is this?"

Guinan gave him a small smile.

"It's green. I think you'll like it."

Data nodded, then took a small sip. He brightened and downed the shot.

"Thank you," he said. "I can't tell you how much I needed that."

Guinan smiled again, broader this time, and refilled the little glass.

"You're not from around here, are you," she asked.

"I have just reached that same conclusion," Data agreed, understanding what she meant. "Yet, I suspect this universe is closely parallel to my own."

Guinan nodded.

"So, any idea how you got here?"

Data furrowed his brow.

"I believe," he said hesitantly, "that there must have been some sort of transporter malfunction in my own universe. I was beaming back to my Enterprise from Atrea, where my parents have lived for the past eight years, and I found myself in an abandoned transporter room aboard this very ship. You see here, I still have my travel case with me."

He held up the small bag he had carried with him all this time.

Guinan regarded him knowingly.

"I have a pretty good theory as to how you got here, but it doesn't have to do with any transporter accident."
"What do you mean?" asked Data.

"I mean we're going to have to tell the captain about all this." Guinan looked concerned. "I don't know how he's going to take it, so soon after Data's loss, but it must be done. I'm sure you want to be getting back to your own reality."

"Of course I do. I've been away from my wife and daughter for nearly a month, and I miss them both dreadfully."

Data cast a glance around the crowded room, then turned back to Guinan.

"Speaking of Tasha and Lal, I don't see them here. Do they not have counterparts in this universe?"

Guinan's expression softened.

"Your name is Data too, isn't it?"

Data smiled a bit sheepishly.

"Actually, it's Daniel. Danny Soong. But, when I was a very young child, my father discovered I have a near-perfect photographic memory, so he used me as 'his little database' - Data, get it? The name's stuck ever since. I've been told it suits me. Whether that's a good thing…"

He shrugged and took another sip of his green beverage.

Guinan smiled.

"I suppose there are worse nicknames."

Data grinned and downed the last of his drink. The warmth spread through him, encouraging his talkative side.

"Oh, there certainly are. My father had one of the worst. He was called 'Often Wrong Soong' by the colonists on Omicron Theta, where I was born. That's one of most terrible nicknames I've ever heard. It's insulting to his brilliance, and it doesn't even rhyme. The colonists seemed to think it clever, though. I won't pretend to understand."

Guinan looked up, her pleasant expression tightening.

"Here comes the captain," she said.

Data felt his back stiffen, suddenly overcome with the sense that his presence was grossly inappropriate. This was a group of anguished people, all gathered together to remember a fallen comrade, and here he was, a counterpart from another universe-identical to their own Data for all he knew-who could only freshen the pain of the loss. He brought his glass to his lips, then realized it was empty and placed it quickly back on the counter.

"Captain Picard," said Guinan in her most gracious hostess voice.

"Hello, Guinan."

Data did not turn to look at the captain, afraid of what might happen if he was recognized. He listened as Captain Picard sighed the kind of deep, shaky sigh that Data had sighed himself in the Atrean base's transporter room barely an hour before. He marveled at how drastically his situation had changed in such a short time.
"I believe I need a refill," the captain said, clinking his glass down on the shiny countertop.

"Then, I believe you and this gentleman here are in the same state. I also believe you ordered the same drink. Aldebaran whiskey, right?"

For the first time, Captain Picard noticed the man sitting on the bar stool next to him. His brow furrowed.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I thought I had introduced myself to all the new members of the Enterprise, but I don't believe I've had the pleasure."

Data turned to him and cocked his head slightly to the side, confused.

"No? But I thought-"

The captain let out a sharp gasp.

"Data…!"

It was barely above a whisper, but it seemed to cut through all the noise and hubbub in the room. All eyes turned to where he and the captain were sitting. Under such intense scrutiny from so many people, Data found himself wishing he could melt away through the floor.

The captain stared at Data in wide-eyed disbelief, his mouth moving without words.

"But, how-?" he eventually managed. He swallowed, shook his head, and tried to collect his thoughts.

Data just sat there, uncertain what to say and feeling unpleasantly like the glass in a shop window: like everyone was staring through him expecting to see something else. When the captain turned to him again, his gaze was particularly sharp and intense.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "How did you get here?"

Before Data could answer, he was interrupted by Geordi, who just then burst through the crowd, followed closely by Commander Riker, Counselor Troi, Worf, and Dr. Crusher.

"Data!" Geordi exclaimed, grabbing him by the shoulders. "Data, is it really YOU? I knew you couldn't really be dead!"

The excitement in Geordi's voice faded somewhat, replaced by confusion as he looked Data over… probably scanning him with every setting of his VISOR-enhanced vision, Data thought.

"But, you look perfectly human! How did this happen?"

Data stared at him, a cold, eerie suspicion crawling up his spine. A suspicion he didn't really want to contemplate.

"Nothing happened, Geordi. I have always been human."

Picard turned his sharp gaze to Guinan.

"Guinan, I demand to know what this is all about."

Guinan raised her hands in defense.
"I'm not completely sure myself. But he is real, and he is here. And, he's going to need your help to get back home."

Picard looked enlightened, but still suspicious.

Data attempted a smile.

"I do recognize that this is an exceptionally awkward situation, sir, and I do not wish to cause any of you further discomfort, but you must believe it was not my intention to come here. My name is Danny Soong, but people have always called me Data."

Picard straightened.

"Well, Mr. …Soong?"

"It's Dr. Soong, actually," Data corrected. "I hold doctorates in exobiology and probability mechanics. But I prefer 'Data.' 'Dr. Soong' was my father, and he and I… Let's just say we've had a somewhat rocky relationship."

"Very well then, Data," Picard said awkwardly. "Since it appears you're going to be a guest here, I'll see about assigning you some quarters." He nodded to Riker, who stepped away to arrange it via his combadge. "I'm sure you'd like the chance to…” He glanced at Data's suitcase, "…unpack."

"Thank you, sir," Data said and took a breath, resolving to confront his suspicion head-on. "And, if I'm not out of line, may I inquire… Was my counterpart here…an android?"

"Yeah," Geordi said, sounding a little defensive. "He was a good man."

Data nodded, struggling not to let the squirmy discomfort in his gut show on his face.

"I see. Thank you. And you say he suffered…a system failure?"

"That's right." Geordi frowned. "You don't seem surprised."

"No," Data said, his voice completely flat. "I am not. If you all will please excuse me, I am extremely tired. I have no wish to trouble you, but if you could tell me where…?"

"It's no trouble, Commander," Picard said, and turned to Riker. "Number One, will you please show Dr. So— Commande Data…to his quarters."

Riker nodded and headed for the door.

"This way, Commander."

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

References include TNG: The Next Phase; The Best of Both Worlds; Datalore; Brothers; and Relics and TOS: By Any Other Name.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Three

Riker slid his eyes over to the newcomer as they stood together in the turbolift, trying to observe him without seeming too obvious about it. Despite his fair, human skin tone, it was uncanny how close a match this man was for the Data he knew. He had the same height, same build, the same features… even the same swept-back hairstyle. But what Riker really found disconcerting was how this man walked and held himself like Data: his posture a little too straight, his quick stride just slightly too rigid, his alert blue eyes seeming to analyze and process all he saw...

"Sir?"

Riker blinked and straightened, a little embarrassed he'd been caught gawping.

"Yes…uh, Data…"

"I couldn't help but notice that you have been staring at me since we entered the turbolift. Is there something you wish to ask me?"

"Well, it's just…"

The doors opened and Riker led the way into the corridor. The man followed, easily keeping up with Riker's ground-eating stride.

"Just what, sir?"

Riker glanced down at him, fully unsettled by the man's open, curious expression. It was just so… Data.

The man lowered his eyes.

"I get the impression that my presence disturbs you," he said in Data's voice.

"Not at all," Riker insisted, a little too brusquely, and stopped short outside the larger of the ship's vacant VIP quarters.

The man blinked in surprise.

"You are putting me here?" he said. "But…are these quarters not usually reserved for admirals and visiting dignitaries—"

"Well, you're here representing another dimension, aren't you?" Riker teased, but his attempt at levity seemed to brush straight over the man's head.

"As I stated before, sir, my presence here is not intentional. I am, therefore, hardly an official representative of—"

"Data, I didn't mean it like that," he said.

The man paused, his blue eyes flickering slightly.
"Ah – I understand. I'm sorry, sir, I should have recognized you were teasing me. My own Commander Riker has a very similar sense of humor."

"Does he?" Riker said, and strode into the room.

Data followed for a few steps, seeming a little overwhelmed by the spacious quarters, and the sweeping starscape that dominated the room.

"Are you all right?" Riker asked.

Data nodded.

"I will be fine, sir. Thank you."

"If there's anything you need…"

"I know the drill, Commander," Data said, and gave him a small smile. "I am a Starfleet Officer."

"Of course."

Riker started to leave, then turned back.

"Data…"

"Yes sir?"

"Data, I just can't…" Riker fought a bit of an internal struggle, then sighed. "You said in Ten Forward that you were human."

"All my life," the man said, a little wryly.

"But you didn't seem at all surprised to learn our Data was…"

"A machine?"

"An android. Yes."

The man pursed his lips, then walked to the coffee table and set about opening his travel case. His fingers moved with a swift, efficient dexterity that, again, sparked Riker's suspicions. He pulled out a slim data padd and brought it over for Riker to see.

"Here," he said, flicking quickly through a long list of holograph files to find the right one. "A Soong family photo."

Riker took the slim padd and stared at the image on the screen. Four faces stared back at him, the oldest of which he immediately recognized as Dr. Noonian Soong. The middle-aged cyberneticist stood a small distance from a woman he knew to be a younger version of Dr. Juliana O'Donnell, Soong's ex-wife, whom Riker had met once when she'd come aboard the Enterprise with her current husband, the Atrean scientist Pran Tainer. She was clasping the shoulder of a small boy while Dr. Soong proudly had his arm around the shoulders of a white-gold android wearing a bland, rather child-like expression.

"My father," Data pointed to Soong. "And his 'son.'" His finger moved to the android. "That one is Prototype A-3. I called him Archie."

"Then, that boy there…?" Riker said, his eyes drawn to the child's surprisingly solemn expression.
"That's me," Data said. "And my mother. I often got the impression my father was only truly aware of us when we assisted him with his work. This was taken on Terlina III. We were completely isolated there all the time I was growing up. The house computer and my father's prototypes were my only friends."

The man's expression turned slightly bitter.

"Not exactly the healthiest environment for a child diagnosed with NVLD - nonverbal learning disorder - but as my father shared that social disability he did not see the problem."

"Social disability?" Riker prompted, too curious to let such an intriguing comment pass.

Data shook his head and chuffed a slight laugh.

"I do not know why I am telling you this. I do not talk about this. Not with anyone. But these past few days have been so…so very…” He smiled grimly. "I suppose I could say reality-shaking. That I believe I would like someone to confide in. If you do not mind, Commander?"

"Oh, no," Riker said, and moved over to one of the plush, gray chairs that flanked the coffee table. "Not at all. May I…?"

"Please," Data said, and took a seat himself. "Would you like something to eat? Or, perhaps a beverage," he asked politely.

Riker was once again struck by the man's eerie Data-ish-ness, as if he was constantly struggling to work out the right way to act like a normal person, instead of just being one.

"No. No thanks, I'm fine."

The man nodded and leaned back in his chair. It was a moment before he spoke.

"I understand that you have recently lost your close friend," he said quietly. "Well I, too, have suffered a very recent loss. When I arrived here, however it happened, I was beaming back to my ship from my father's funeral. Seeing him again…having to say goodbye…” He sighed. "It brought back some very…uncomfortable memories."

"I can imagine," Riker said. "I had a rocky relationship with my own father. He's a very strong-willed, very career-driven man. For much of my life, I felt like I was…in his way."

"That may have been preferable to feeling invisible," Data said. "My father used me, and my mother, as he used everything: as tools to further his research into artificial consciousness. Not artificial intelligence – he did not want to make better computer systems. My father wanted to create mechanical lifeforms. Self-aware machines, as creative and passionate as any organic being."

Riker leaned forward, completely attentive.

Data glanced down at the holograph in his hands.

"When I was very young, I believed his was the greatest calling in the universe. His goal to create mechanical life became my life too," he said quietly. "But, as I grew older, I began to have serious doubts about our work. Aside from Archie, who survived for six years, the prototypes we created together rarely lived for more than a few weeks. Losing them was like losing a little brother. My father kept each of them in glass display cases in his lab and I would talk to them, hoping my presence would somehow encourage them to open their eyes, to play at puzzles with me again. But, of course, they never did. They taught me that life is fragile and fleeting. But it was my father himself
who taught me the real danger his androids faced. Human prejudice."

He shifted his eyes to his twitching thumbs, forcing them still as his grip on the padd tightened.

"My father had dragged us off to that awful jungle world to get away from his critics on the science colony where I was born."

"Would that be Omicron Theta?" Riker asked.

Data nodded.

"That is correct. One year, when I was thirteen, my family and I went back there for a cybernetics symposium. My father wished to introduce his critics to Archie. But, the people there seemed to believe the android he really wished to reveal…was me."

Riker wrinkled his brow.

"I don't understand."

"You might if you had known me then," Data said flatly. "In a very real way, I was the living database my father had trained me to be. My head was full of facts and figures ready to recite on command, but it was all book knowledge. I could debate points of philosophy with experts, work out complex equations in minutes, yet when it came to reading social cues or interpreting body language, I was hopelessly illiterate."

"You seem pretty sociable now," Riker said.

"Only after nearly two decades of persistent hard work and observation," Data pointed out. "And, even now, I am aware I come off as a little...odd."

"I wouldn't say 'odd,'" Riker started, but Data shook his head with a smile.

"It's all right, Commander. I understand what you are trying to say, and I appreciate the compliment. But, looking back now, recalling my child self, I must admit I can see the reasoning behind their assumptions. My mother had tried her best to teach me social conventions. But, there was no society on Terlina III. No children for me to interact with, no adult role models to learn from or emulate. There was only her and me, my father, and his androids. There was no way I could have known...just how different I really was."

"And, this is the social disability you mentioned?" Riker asked gently.

Data smiled very slightly.

"A symptom, yes. There are many symptoms I have had to struggle with my entire life. Have you ever heard of the autistic spectrum, or Asperger's syndrome?"

Riker shrugged.

"Can't say that I have."

"I'm not surprised," Data said. "Such issues are all but unheard of in this day and age, when early genetic screening can correct almost any...defect. But, my father was vehemently against genetic manipulation of any kind, no matter how benign. You see, his ancestor...and mine...was Dr. Arik Soong."

Riker straightened in his chair.
"Not the geneticist Arik Soong! The mad scientist who stole those engineered Augment embryos left over from the Eugenics Wars? The last remnants of Khan Noonien Singh's so-called 'master race'?"

Data nodded somberly.

"The same. But he was not a 'mad scientist.' He was a talented geneticist who acted rashly in support of a very wrong belief. He sought to prove that a nurturing environment could alter the aggressive, sociopathic nature of the Augments, but he realized his mistake too late. The Augments turned against him and caused a great deal of destruction before they were finally destroyed, and my ancestor returned to prison. But, his memory cast quite a pall over our family. My father's name, in fact, Noonian, was intended by his parents as a warning reminder against intelligence unchecked...something of a Soong family tradition, I'm afraid. I am fortunate my mother chose to break that convention and name me for a song she loved from her childhood in Ireland."

"Let me guess," Riker said with a smile. "'Danny Boy.'"

Data chuckled a little bashfully.

"It is better than carrying a name like Arik Soong. But, like that awful legacy, this disorder I mentioned can be inherited. My father had it – worse than I do, I suspect – and it is believed Arik Soong had it as well. It is often referred to as 'the genius syndrome,' as the social difficulties associated with it often accompany very high intelligence. My own IQ is rated higher than my father's, and I can remember nearly every image or fact I am exposed to...information that often floods back to me unbidden when I am trying to concentrate or sleep, but refuses to appear when I actually need it. It is immensely frustrating."

"I suspect it is," Riker said. "Then, this syndrome of yours is the reason those scientists thought you might be…"

"An android?" Data finished for him. "Yes. My father may have treated me like a living database at home, but there on Omicron Theta... That was the first time I truly understood what it felt like...to be dehumanized. My father introduced me to those people as his son, but it wasn't long before they realized I did not react to them as normal children would. This raised their suspicions, and before I knew it, I was being led away to a lab for a series of mental and physical tests."

His expression clenched as the images washed over him, as clear as the day they'd happened. It was a humiliating memory that, at the time, had been merely confusing, but in retrospect he'd recognized as a hurtful and infuriating blow to his young psyche.

"Those people treated me like a thing, spoke about me as if I was not in the room, poked and prodded and questioned me with no regard to my feelings," he said. "I – sheltered, ignorant, bewildered little me – did not know enough about acceptable social behavior to protest their treatment of me, or even to get angry. But, my father did. And, my father let them take me. He allowed them to test me, like a machine. The understanding came to me gradually, over a course of several days. I kept remembering the look in his eyes…and I realized he'd actually contemplated letting those people believe I was one of his creations, rather than his own, biological son. He'd been willing to let me be treated like this, to let Archie be treated like this, to let any android we created be treated like...like property, as long as his precious colleagues acknowledged his success. Because that's how those so-called scientists viewed our androids. Not as people, not as living beings to be respected, but as owned creations they could patent, mass produce, and ship off to serve the Federation as innocent, unwitting slaves. When I realized that, when I saw the hypocrisy… That is when the rift began between my father and myself."

Data pursed his lips, his eyes fixed on the holograph.
"My mother refused to see it," he said. "She kept saying I was overreacting to a silly misunderstanding and we all should just laugh it off as if it never happened. But I could not laugh it off. I could not see the humor in mistaking a boy for an android, or in treating an android like some fancy tech-forward trinket. It was not until after Archie…died…” he swallowed back the memory, "the next year, that she began to understand my epiphany.

"My father did not mourn for Archie, as we did. He saw only the flaws in his design, the inefficiencies in his programming, and ideas for improvements. Archie was his – his creation, his invention, his thing to tinker with and reprogram as he willed. To me, Archie had been Archie. My friend. My brother. To my mother, he had been another son. So, when my father immediately began construction on a new android, I refused to help him. I knew what he was doing was wrong. I turned my focus instead to studying for, and passing, the Federation's high school equivalency examinations for colonists and, when I was fifteen, I left. I applied, with my mother's help, to Harvard University on Earth and earned two doctorates before I was twenty-two. Unwilling to be stuck on a planet, a sedentary researcher like my father, I spent a year in officer's training at Starfleet Academy and headed back to the stars.

"Unfortunately, my social disorder followed me. My early shipmates regarded me as 'weird' and shunned me at social gatherings. I began to fear my Asperger's would impede my ambitions for promotion, and it did remain an agonizing hindrance, until Captain Picard decided to take a chance and selected me to be his second officer aboard the Enterprise. There, for the first time in my life, I found acceptance. I discovered I did not have to pretend to be someone I was not in order to succeed in my position. I learned about friendship, and…” he blushed a little, his thumb brushing over a ring Riker just noticed on his finger. "I fell in love."

Riker's eyes widened, and he broke into a beaming smile.

"Data!" he said. "Don't tell me you're married! Who's the lucky woman?"

Data flipped through a few more holographs and handed Riker the padd.

"My family," he said proudly. "That's me and Tasha, and our little daughter, Lal."

Riker stared, feeling his face pale at the sight of the happy, grinning family. The human Data, a beaming Tasha Yar who was very much alive and wearing a blue uniform, and the dark-haired little girl, maybe about a year or two years old...

"Oh, my God…"

Data picked up on his discomfort.

"Is something wrong?"

"No," Riker said, unable to take his eyes from the photo. "No, they're beautiful, Data. Absolutely beautiful. I just… That really is Lal…"

Data tilted his head sharply.

"Then, Lal does have a counterpart in this universe?"

Riker winced, aware he'd probably said too much.

"You could say that."

"From your reaction, I presume you are reluctant to reveal her nature to me. Is she an android as
well? May I see her?"

Riker sighed.

"Oh, Data..." he said.

"Please." Data's blue eyes were pleading. "It has been so long since I last saw my family. Tasha and Lal were away visiting Tasha's sister, Ishara, while I was with my parents. I meant to join them after three days, but my father's declining health compelled me to remain on Atrea until the end. He was often delirious and in so much pain, we decided it would be better for Lal if...if she did not..." The way he shook his head was more like a shudder. "If Lal is here, on this ship, even if she is an android, I would very much like to meet her."

Riker squirmed in his chair.

"Yeah, well... Data, there's no easy way to say this. She's gone. She only lived a short time. She's with our Data now...in the cybernetics lab."

Data squeezed his eyes shut and lowered his head.

"I see," he said in a small voice. "And...Tasha?"

"Lieutenant Yar was killed in action...seven years ago."

Data's nod was slow and deliberate.

"Then...nothing remains of my family here, in this universe. I am...alone."

Riker's expression crumpled.

"Oh...now, Data, don't say that. You've got us. Maybe we're not the same as your friends back on your Enterprise, but we're here for you, and we'll do everything we can to help you get back to your family. I promise you that."

Data nodded, a few strands of dark hair falling over his forehead.

"I appreciate that, Commander. Thank you."

"One more thing," Riker said. "Unless the captain says otherwise, you're a guest on this ship, which means you're not under my command. You can call me Will."

Data looked up, startled.

"I'm not sure that I could, sir."

"Hey, if you're Data, I'm Will, and I won't hear any argument, got it?"

"Yes, si- Will," Data choked, clearly discomfited by the informality.

"Try it out a few more times," Riker said with a smile. "You'll get used to it." He stood and headed for the door, then turned back around. "Say, Data," he said. "Do you play poker?"

Data brightened.

"I do, s—Will," he said.
"Good to hear," Riker said, his smile taking on a slightly wicked cast. "The holodecks are open to you, as is the arboretum and all the other recreational areas on this ship. The captain will probably want to talk with you, so keep an eye out for a briefing summons. In the meantime, I should be getting back to the reception."

"I understand," Data said. "I'm sorry to have kept you away so long."

"It was no problem," Riker said. "Try to relax, make yourself comfortable. We'll get to the bottom of this before you know it."

"Yes, sir," Data said as he turned to go. "And, Will…?"

"Yeah, Data?"

"Thank you for listening."

Riker grinned.

"Any time, my friend," he said, and strode out the door.

Data stared after him for a moment, then strolled slowly around the enormous room, trying to think how he could possibly feel comfortable in such a place. The furniture was not where it should be. Back on his Enterprise, he and Tasha had arranged their coffee table and chairs to include the starscape, not block it. This had to be remedied. In addition, the fruit in the fruit bowl should be arranged by color and planet of origin. It was very disconcerting seeing it there, casually lumped together in an undiscerning pile. The towels in the bathroom were not folded correctly — that is, they were not folded the way Tasha folded them. The walls of the bedroom should be lit with a blue glow… Tasha's favorite color. And Lal's doll… the plushy orange cat he'd brought back for her from Atrea… That should sit on the lower shelf. Once these changes were implemented, perhaps the eerie sense of emptiness would stop pressing so heavily on his shoulders.

Data rubbed his hands together, ready to get to work, when the door signal chirped.

"Who's there?" he asked.

"It's me. Uh, Geordi La Forge."

Data straightened, not sure whether to feel glad or nervous. In his reality, Geordi was his best friend. Neither of their parents had opted for genetic screening and, growing up, he and the blind engineer had both suffered social ridicule and ostracization for their respective 'handicaps.' He'd gathered from the man's reaction at the reception that Geordi and his android counterpart had shared a similarly close bond in this universe. Could that be why he was coming to see him now?

"Please enter, Geordi."

Geordi seemed to have opted for feeling nervous. He shuffled through the sliding doors, awkwardly rubbing his palms on his uniform's trousers.

"Hi, Data," he said.

"Geordi," Data acknowledged. "Would you care to sit down?"

"Uh… that's OK. I don't really…"

"Then, would you mind helping me move this coffee table across the room?"
Geordi frowned.

"OK... But, why?"

"Because that is where the coffee table should be."

Geordi shrugged and shuffled over to the opposite end of the table.

"We'll lift on three," Data said. "Ready? One...two...three..."

Geordi and Data hefted the heavy, polished table a few inches off the carpet and staggered diagonally across the room. Geordi frowned to see the genuine effort on Data's face as he strained to complete a task his android counterpart could have done with one hand.

"Ah, thank you, Geordi," Data said once he'd arranged the table 'just so.' "I did not wish to damage the carpet by dragging the table here."

"Data," Geordi said, watching the man go back for the chairs, one by one, "why are you doing this?"

"Because this room is too large and too empty and I want it to feel more like home," Data replied, returning with the bowl of fruit. As Geordi watched, he emptied the bowl onto the table, quickly sorted the fruit into color-coded piles, then neatly refilled the bowl.

"Hmm," Geordi said, raising an eyebrow over his VISOR as the man headed to the bathroom and started efficiently refolding towels. "Look, I don't mean to interrupt if you're busy..."

"I am not busy," Data said, now adjusting the light settings in the bedroom. "Was there something you wanted?"

"I, uh..." Geordi started. "I wanted to talk to you about what you said. At the reception. You said you weren't surprised about what happened to Data."

"I am not," Data said, striding over to his open suitcase and pulling out a toy cat.

"You always pack that on trips?" he asked.

"No," Data said, carefully arranging the cat on the lower shelf so it looked like it was sitting with its tail curled over its legs. "I bought this doll for Lal." He straightened and looked at Geordi. "My daughter. In my universe, she is just over a year old."

Geordi seemed uncomfortable.

"And is she..."

"She is human too, yes," Data said. "As is my wife, Tasha. Although Commander Riker has told me that, in this reality, they are both...gone."

Geordi nodded.

"I didn't realize," he said softly. "This has got to be pretty awful for you, huh. Showing up here like this, on today of all days. Finding out..."

"Yes," Data said rather stiffly, and his breath began to quicken. "It has been...quite difficult. I must admit I am suddenly feeling the strain far more acutely than before. Perhaps the initial shock of my
situation has begun to wear off."

"Here, look, don't panic Data," Geordi said, striding over to help the trembling man to a chair. "It's going to be all right."

"Yes. That is what Commander Riker said," Data told him, starting to rock slightly in his chair. "But he is not the one trapped in a universe where his counterpart is an android and his entire family is..."

He rubbed his eyes harshly with his sleeve.

Geordi patted his shoulder.

"Hey, it's all right to cry if you need to. You shouldn't hold all that in."

"I'm sorry," Data said, swallowing hard. "I did not mean to collapse like this. I just...I miss my baby, Geordi. I miss her so much."

Geordi straightened, a sudden idea occurring to him.

"You just wait here, Data," he said. "I'll be right back."

"Where are you going, Geordi?"

"I'm just going to fetch something. I'll be back in three minutes. Five, tops."

It took longer than five minutes. Data had finished unpacking and was standing by the replicator, knowing he should probably eat something but not really wanting to, when Geordi returned, a squirming ball of orange fur clutched in his arms.

"Got 'er!" he announced proudly, holding the irked cat out to Data. "Data, meet Spot. Spot, Data."

The cat peered up at him through wide, yellow eyes. Data found himself smiling.

"Hello, Spot," he said, reaching for the cat. "What a strange name for a cat."

"Data's attempt at humor, I think," Geordi said. "He never could get the hang of it. But, she's his cat. I thought...you know...it might help if..."

Data nodded, holding the cat close as he rubbed her ears. She purred in happy contentment.

"Thank you, Geordi," he said. "Thank you very much. And I am terribly sorry about your friend. I should have explained. In my reality, my father's androids never survived very long. I took it very hard when they died. I have been treated like a data machine myself, and learning of my counterpart here... I am afraid my reaction may have seemed colder than, in fact, it was."

"Hey, I get it," Geordi said. "I'm not sure how I'd react in the same situation. All things considered, I think you're holding up like a champ."

Data smiled.

"I have not worked with androids for many years," he said. "Since I was a teenager, in fact. But if it is all right with you, I would be willing to take a look at your Data while I am here. Perhaps my familiarity with my father's work might shed some light on the cause of his system failure."

Geordi's expression couldn't contain his enthusiasm, and he bounced on the balls of his feet.
"Yes," he said. "Yes, that's what I was hoping you'd say. Maybe, between the two of us, we could—"

"Captain to Commander Data," Picard's voice rang over the comm system.

Data glanced at Geordi, then lowered Spot to the floor and strode to the comm panel.

"Data here, Captain."

"If you feel you've settled in, Commander, would you mind meeting with me in my ready room? I would like to discuss your situation in greater detail and, perhaps, organize a staff conference later in the day."

"Understood, sir. I am on my way. Data out." He turned to Geordi. "I'm afraid I do not know how long this meeting will take."

"It's OK," Geordi said. "How about this: I'll give you Data's access code, so you can drop by Data's lab – I mean, the cybernetics lab – whenever you're free. This code only works for that door, though. Data kind of had a thing for passwords. Hand me your padd?"

Data handed him the padd he'd shown to Riker only minutes before. The image of his family was still on the screen.

"Oh, look at this…" Geordi said when he saw the happy grins. "Data, if you only knew. Your life is an android's dream come true."

"I do know, Geordi," Data said somberly. "And I have no wish to lose it."

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

References include the three-episode arc ENT: Borderland, Cold Station 12, and The Augments; TNG: Inheritance, The Icarus Factor, and The Offspring; TOS: Space Seed; and the movie Star Trek: The Wrath of Khan.
Chapter Four

Captain's Log, Stardate 47636.02: The Enterprise is continuing its analysis of OGLE-2005-BLG-390L: a red dwarf star orbited by a rocky planet some five times the mass of Earth. The planet, first detected by human scientists in the Earth calendar year 2005, has been home to a Federation research team for the past ten Federation standard years; approximately the duration of one planetary orbit. Their project now reaching completion, the Enterprise has been dispatched to review their work, dismantle the research station, and transport the scientists back to the Daystrom Institute.

On a more personal note, the sudden, tragic loss of Mr. Data continues to have a profound effect on my crew, made all the keener by the unexpected – and, as yet, unexplained – appearance of a man claiming to be Dr. Daniel Soong: a human counterpart of our Lt. Commander Data from another reality. This man, who also calls himself 'Data,' has agreed to undergo tests that will hopefully determine the validity of his claims and help us find a way to return him to his own quantum universe...

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Data sighed and drew the silvery blanket up to his chin. Describing the events of the past eighteen hours as "a long day" would be a gross understatement. He had stepped onto the Atrean transporter platform eagerly anticipating the distraction of a new mission; meeting the returning shuttle bearing Geordi, Riker, Worf, Tasha, Lal, and Guinan; enjoying the long-missed comfort of a quiet evening at home in the company of his beloved wife and daughter...

Instead…

Instead, he had endured multiple series of tests in Sickbay, questions from the Captain and Commander Riker, an interview with Counselor Troi and, perhaps worst of all, the icky, creepy, sickly, disconcerting knowledge that he did not belong. Not to this crew, not to this ship, not to this universe. No, this universe was home to an android. Data's own mechanical counterpart: a truly sentient, self-aware mechanical lifeform who had earned the respect, and the friendship, of the entire crew. And, although he found the thought extremely unsettling, Data couldn't shake his awareness that, if he'd still been functional, this machine Data would have been his father's ultimate achievement: an intelligent, intuitive android son. The culmination of Noonian Soong's most coveted dream.

A dream his father could never, now, attain.

Data had spent his entire childhood watching Soong's struggle to prove that the creation of a being like this Data android was possible, but he'd never achieved any long-term success. Instead of the accolade and recognition he'd deserved, the frustrated and, admittedly, abrasive genius had received only ridicule and ostracization to the point where he'd taken his family and fled society to conduct his work in isolation.

Here, however, in this universe…without the burden of a family, a child, to hold him back…

*Was it because of me?* Data wondered. *Did the responsibilities of raising me keep him from
realizing his dream? Did my influence, my rejection, deny my father his place in history?*

Data shifted to his side, then rolled to his other side, then lay flat, staring at the faint, dappled shadows on the ceiling. His mind filled with images as accurate and vivid as holographic recreations. The images kept flashing, flashing, flashing, without his volition, churning like old-style film through a projector, replaying his vigil at his father's bedside, the tears in his mother's eyes, his childhood home on Terlina III, the elated grin his father had worn those times he rushed in from his lab late for dinner, his gray hair wild, babbling about his latest breakthrough…

Tears leaked down Data's face and he reached out an arm in the dark, seeking a presence, a warmth, he knew would not be there. Instead, his fingers met a void. He felt it as a tingle against his skin...an almost physical absence.

Quickly, he sat up and got out of the bed.

Data wasn't an officer on this ship. There was no need to get back into his uniform. Striding to the replicator he requested a set of comfortable civilian clothes, got dressed, brushed his hair, and stalked out to roam the nighttime corridors of this alien Enterprise.

******

The lights in the Observation Lounge were dimmed.

Deanna Troi knew, intellectually, that dimming the lights was an effective means of conserving power during ship's night, but sitting in the dark like this always made her feel bleary. That wasn't the worst part though. The worst part was sensing its similarly soporific effect on the rest of the gathered staff - a warm, sleepy feeling that evoked the rather unprofessional desire to yawn and lay her head down on the table.

"Tell me your impressions, Number One," the captain was saying, leaning forward over the polished conference table. "You've spoken at some length with this man. Do you believe his assertions?"

"I was skeptical at first," Riker admitted. "But after being around him for a while… I have to say it's uncanny, sir. He strikes me as open, trusting, honest…overanalytical, nervous… A match for our Data in almost every way."

"I have to agree, sir," Geordi added. "Aside from a few emotional quirks, for a while, talking with him… I almost felt like… Like I had my friend back."

The engineer looked down at his folded hands.

Troi felt sympathetic, but also concerned.

"What do you mean, 'emotional quirks'?" she asked.

"Well, he asked me to help him rearrange the furniture in his quarters," Geordi said. "Said he wanted it to feel more like home."

"Well, that's not too unusual. Anything else?" Troi prompted.

Geordi furrowed his brow.

"Most of the time we were talking, he seemed… I don't know. Kind of formal. Detached, even. Very Data-like. Then, we brought up his family and he suddenly got very upset, almost like a mild panic attack. I introduced him to Spot and he seemed OK after that, but… I don't know. If I couldn't see he
was fully organic I'd swear the man was an android. He just doesn't seem to connect like a normal human. If anything, he seems a little…stilted. And he wouldn't look me directly in the face for more than a few seconds."

Riker nodded.

"Yes, I picked up on that too," he said. "I assumed it was a symptom of the 'social disability' he told me about."

Deanna raised an eyebrow.

"Social disability?"

Riker shrugged.

"He described it as Asperger's syndrome. Some form of autism, I think he said."

"Autism?" Dr. Crusher straightened in her chair.

"You know of it, Doctor?" Picard said.

"Of course I know of it," she said. "But, it's an incredibly rare condition...at least, in the Federation. If it's true that Soong has a version of autism, that would certainly shed light on the somewhat unusual results I got from his brain scans. There was nothing alarming – all tests show him to be a healthy, highly intelligent, well adapted officer – but I was a little concerned. I was meaning to look into it in the morning."

"I would like to look into this too, Beverly, if I may," Troi said.

"I'd be happy for any insights you could provide," the doctor said.

Troi nodded, but her lips were stretched in a frown.

"Captain, I think you should know I've been sensing extremely high levels of anxiety from this man. If he is on the autistic spectrum, even if it is a very mild case, I'm concerned that the sudden loss of the familiar structure and support he knew on his Enterprise might trigger a severe panic response. I'm also concerned that he didn't volunteer this information about himself during our interview this afternoon."

"He told me," Riker said. "He probably knows you're empathic – maybe he assumed you already knew."

"Perhaps," Picard said, but Troi sensed his concern. "Doctor, I want to know the results of those tests the moment you have them. Geordi, if it's not too much trouble, I want you to keep an eye on our guest. I'd also like to have him assist the investigation into how he arrived here, and how we might get him home."

"Yes sir. But, Captain," Geordi said, "this man is a cybernetics genius. He worked by Dr. Soong's side for years. If anyone has a chance of finding out what happened to our Data—"

Picard nodded, a thrill of hope briefly brightening his expression as he realized the implications.

"Of course, Mr. La Forge. If he's willing, then I am all for allowing him to find out if there's a way to restore our Mr. Data. Work out a schedule and submit it to Mr. Worf at Ops in the morning. In the meantime, I want you all alert and rested when you return to work, so I'll bid you all good night."
Geordi felt a little awkward checking up on Data's location, but the captain had told him to keep an eye on the man. Besides, Geordi had been the one who'd input his biodata into the computer and presented him with a communicator, since the one from his reality couldn't seem to interface properly with the ship's systems. So, while the rest of the staff shuffled out of the Observation Lounge and into the turbolift on the upper bridge, Geordi strode down the ramp to the lower lift and spoke as soon as the doors closed.

"Computer, location of Daniel Soong?"

"Dr. Daniel Soong is in the cybernetics lab."

"Then that's where I want to go," Geordi said.

The computer chirped an acknowledgement and the lift at once began to move.

Geordi wasn't sure what he'd expected to find once he got to the lab. Soong at the computer panel, probably, pouring over Data's schematics.

What he found made him stop with a jolt.

Lal's body stood upright in the cylindrical diagnostic elevator that dominated the center of the room.

Lal's headless body.

"What the—!"

"Geordi?" Data's voice called from the back of the lab.

"Data?" Geordi rushed toward the sound, hardly daring to hope—

Danny Soong looked up from an incredibly cluttered lab table, a complicated magnifying headset pushed up his forehead and a huge, beaming grin on his face. He wore blue denim trousers and a black shirt with short sleeves, and a leather jacket hung over the back of his chair.

Geordi blinked behind his VISOR (not that the action interrupted its sensory feed to his brain) struggling to recall if he'd ever seen his own Data dressed in anything but his uniform outside the holodeck.

"Is she not beautiful, Geordi?" the man said, indicating Lal's head, which stood in the center of the table. "My sweet little Lalena, all grown up!"

"Lalena…?"

Geordi shuffled closer and peered at the mess, a lurch of horror growing in his gut as he realized just what it was.

"Data..." he said. "You removed her brain. You...you took it apart."

"Of course I did. How else could I trace the physical development of all these anomalies?"
Geordi blinked again.

"Are you… Are you saying you can fix her? That you can undo the cascade failure that led to her shutdown?"

"No," Data said, pulling the magnifier back over his eyes and fixing his attention on the array of tiny circuits and chips that surrounded him. "Cascade failure cannot be reversed. But, if I can determine the catalyst that triggered the development of these critically unstable neural circuit pathways, I can remove them and correct the erroneous code. I can then reconstruct the brain, providing a more stable matrix."

"Then you can repair her?"

"I won't know that until I finish mapping these faulty pathways," Data told him distractedly. "Something set this off… Something that destabilized the system, allowing the rapid formation of numerous pathways, all at once. This unchecked, uneven growth created a host of anomalies, which led to her shutdown. If the underlying cause of this instability cannot be found and corrected, the system error would only reoccur if she were to be reactivated."

Geordi nodded. He and his own Data had come to that same conclusion years before. Geordi wasn't sure how Data would have reacted to seeing his daughter's brain spread out across a lab table. He felt his own reaction very strongly, but he knew there really was no point in blowing up at Soong. The damage had already been done. And if there was any actual hope that Soong could restore Data's daughter…

"You want some help?"

Data raised his head, his wide blue eyes magnified comically by his headset.

"Thank you, Geordi."

Geordi took a seat and Data slid him a fresh data padd.

"I talked to the Captain," Geordi said. "He wants you to join our investigation."

"Excellent. I'll be pleased to assist in any way I can," Data said, his fingers racing over his own keypad as he recorded his observations. "And the androids? Will I be allowed to continue here?"

"Yes," Geordi said, and glanced at him. "Data… Have you had a chance to take a look at…"

"At the mechanical me?" Data seemed to grimace. "No. I could not quite bring myself to…"

"To open the crypt?"

"Gah! Did you have to say it that way?" Data exclaimed, and shuddered hard. "For goodness sake, Geordi, it was disturbing enough seeing my daughter…like that. If she'd looked more like…like herself…I don't think I could have… But, expecting me to look into my own face…after midnight…!"

"OK, OK, I get it," Geordi said. "Maybe we could try tomorrow. Together?"

Data glanced at him and nodded slowly.

"Yeah," he said, starting to calm down. "OK. Yes. That would be…more acceptable."

Geordi offered him a smile, then slid a curved piece of Lal's anterior cinculate cortex closer for
analysis. After a few minutes of industrious silence, he said, "So, did the tests today show anything? Anything we don't already know, that is?"

"Dr. Crusher said it would be some time before the results came back," Data replied, and shook his head. "It is so strange to be here, on the Enterprise, among people who look and act so much like my closest friends, and feel that...I do not belong. Gazes linger just a little too long, smiles always seem a trifle forced. It would be extremely uncomfortable...were it not for you, Geordi. I am grateful that you have decided to trust me enough to allow me access to your cybernetics lab. I was going...a little stir crazy in my quarters."

"Yeah, well, I for one believe your story. And I think you've got the rest of the senior officers convinced too. Human or not, there's a lot of Data in you, Danny. Do you mind if I call you Danny? I know you're not comfortable with 'Dr. Soong.'"

The man squinted up his face.

"Only my mother calls me Danny," he said. "Everyone else calls me Data. Including my wife."

"OK," Geordi said. "I get that. But if we do manage to get our Data...I mean, this universe's version of Data...back online... Having two Datas around... It might get a little confusing."

Data regarded him through the lenses of his headset.

"Surely you're not saying you would confuse me with an android, no matter how human he may be in appearance. An android, when functioning, would give off an electromagnetic aura that would certainly be perceptible by your VISOR. In addition—"

Geordi held up his hands.

"Yes, I know all that. I'm just saying it might be easier if, while you're here, you went by your more...well...human name. Not just for us but...for Data. You don't know him but, seeing you, the way you are..."

Geordi faltered and dropped his hands back to the table.

Data furrowed his brow, struggling to decipher the engineer's meaning.

"I would assume he would react rationally, just as I would upon meeting him...were it not after midnight in a darkened room. No doubt there would be some level of discomfort involved in meeting an individual so similar to oneself, but while we may be quantum duplicates, in a sense, it is not as if we are the same person. No matter how many physical or experiential traits we share, our differences extend to a subatomic level. But, this is all hypothetical, Geordi. We do not yet know if the system failure that caused your Data's shutdown can be repaired."

"Fine then, if you won't do it for him, will you do it for me? Will you let me call you Danny?"

The man regarded him, clearly confused.

"Does it really mean that much to you?"

"Yes. It does."

"Why?"

"Why does it mean so much to you?"
The man shrugged his eyebrows.

"Fair point. Very well, Geordi. If it relieves your discomfort, you may call me Danny."

"Great," Geordi said. "So, your daughter's name is Lalena?"

"Yes," Danny said. "My wife's choice. We had been debating possible names for some time. Tasha liked the idea of naming our child for a song, as my mother had named me for the Irish ballad 'Danny Boy,' but complained that no title she had come across so far 'spoke' to her - until she heard the Donovan song 'Lalena' playing at my parents' house. I tried to explain that Donovan's 'Lalena' refers to the archetype of the socially marginalized woman, such as the streetwalker, but Tasha said she liked the melody and argued that 'Danny Boy' was about death and often sung at funerals. My father then pointed out that the shortened version, Lal, meant 'beloved' in Hindi. I acknowledged that, although the term is usually applied to boys, it can be a unisex appellation. This pleased us both and, so, we agreed that would be our child's name: Lalena. Lal Juliana Soong."

Geordi smiled.

"I guess you guys are pretty happy together, huh."

"Yes," Danny said, and his expression grew distant. Suddenly, he took off his headset, stood, and grabbed his jacket from the chair.

"My brain's gone muzzy," he said. "I cannot work on this any longer. Would you care to meet again in the morning, Geordi?"

"Sure," Geordi said, getting to his feet. "Want to meet in Ten Forward for breakfast? Say, 0700 hours?"

Danny nodded and strode for the door.

Geordi stared after him for a moment, then looked down at Lal's scattered brain and sighed.

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

References include TNG: Heart of Glory; The Offspring; and The Quality of Life.
Chapter 6

Chapter Five

It was very late. Or very early. Either way, Guinan liked this time of night. The energy and hustle of the day had long since faded to a slow, sleepy calm, and the morning shift had yet to rise.

Guinan glided into Ten Forward and set about grinding and preparing a pot of fresh coffee. Replicators were all well and good, but sometimes, some mornings, a cup of the real thing could make all the difference.

At a table by the viewports, a lone figure stirred: a man dressed in civilian clothes, a leather jacket slung over the back of his chair. He'd been asleep when she'd walked in, but now she could see him watching her reflection in the transparent aluminum window. Leaving the coffee to percolate, she grabbed a few of the fresh oranges she'd gathered from the ship's arboretum, tossed them in a press, and poured the juice into two glasses.

As she approached his table, the man said, "A monk, a clone, and a Ferengi walked into a bar."

"What?"

"A monk, a clone, and a Ferengi walked into a bar," he repeated, and turned to face her.

She waited to see if he'd go on. When he didn't, she prompted, "And…?"

"They said 'ow'."

She stared at him for a moment, then broke out in a snicker that grew into a giggle.

He smiled.

"Data, that's terrible," she said.

"I know," he agreed. "But it made you laugh."

She slid him a glass of juice. He sighed, and took a long, appreciative sip.

"Thank you," he said. "I take it my duplicate here doesn't have much of a sense of humor."

"I take it you do?" Guinan said, sitting down across from him.

Data's smile turned wicked.

"You'd have to ask my shipmates," he said, and turned his eyes to the stars, pressing his foot against the window's edge and rocking back on his chair.

"To be honest, I was kind of a blank when it came to humor when I was first assigned to the Enterprise," he told her. "I loved W.C. Fields and the Marx Brothers and Danny Kaye – you know, snappy wordplay stuff like that – but joking around…forget it. Humor…real, spontaneous humor…It's one of those subtle social banter things you need a social context to master, and I never had that growing up. Even now, while I have become far more adept at recognizing the vocal intonations,
body cues, and contextual situations that indicate irony and sarcasm, I am still far from proficient."

He reached for his juice and contemplated it for a while. Guinan waited patiently and took a sip of her own juice, just listening.

"Still…" he said at last, "there's something about the Enterprise… The ship, the crew… It's…a sense of freedom I've never really known. A freedom to be yourself, to experiment, to discover talents you never knew you had. It took me a while to understand…about a year or so before I began to…'lighten up', as Commander Riker would say. I started experimenting with social banter, testing acceptable boundaries, trying out goofy jokes on my friends, and within a few weeks I discovered, not only am I a fairly good mimic, I can crack up the Captain with just a few well timed words." He snickered into his glass. "It is a power I rather savor."

"Hmm," Guinan said, and raised a non-existent brow. "I'm curious. Was there any prompt for this experiment, or did you just wake up one morning with the sudden urge to investigate humor?"

"There was a prompt," Data admitted, turning back to face her. "Some sleazy cargo ship captain, Okona. He 'put the moves' on Tasha and I…well… I feared I could not…compete." "Ah," Guinan said, as if that explained everything.

"You know this Okona?"

"Let's just say his visit had a similar impact on our Data. So, let me guess. He teased you about not understanding humor and you got into one of your obsessions, studying and overanalyzing practically everything ever recorded on the subject."

"Yes," Data said. "But how did you know about my obsessions?"

"Obsessive behavior, fixation on details, it's all part and parcel of your…personality quirk. I must say, for an autistic, you are extremely high functioning."

"It is Asperger's syndrome. Quite a mild case. Please, do not tell the crew."

"Why not? It's nothing to be ashamed of."

"I know. I told Commander Riker, but that was in confidence. I just…I don't…"

He closed his eyes, as if shutting out a rush of unpleasant memories.

"Please," he said.

"All right, my lips are sealed," Guinan assured him.

Data's shoulders relaxed, and he sighed.

"So, you're a mimic, eh?" she said. "What's your best shtick?"

Data regarded her for a long moment, then he lifted his juice glass and, in a near-perfect imitation of Captain Picard's rich tones, he said, "Guinan, I ordered Earl Grey. I swear this tastes more like Orange Pekoe."

Guinan laughed out loud.

"You nailed him!"
"That’s what she said," he intoned, still in Picard's voice.

"Oh my—" She snorted helplessly and shook her head. "Oh, Data, that's really bad. Don't do that."

Data shrugged, but he was laughing with her.

"Hey, you're the one who told me there's no such thing as a bad joke. Only bad timing. Unfortunately, my timing appears to be off. By about three years, if today's stardate is to be believed."

"Do you want to talk about it?" she said in Troi's voice.

Data's eyes widened, and he grinned.

"That's really good," he said. "I was not aware you could mimic voices."

"There's a lot about me you don't know."

"I believe that," he said. "For example, I do not know your theory as to how I arrived here. Perhaps you might enlighten me?"

"Is that why you came here?" she asked.

"Yes and no," he said. "I came here because I could not sleep in that room. I miss Tasha. And…"

He swallowed hard.

"Guinan, I am really scared. There are so many variables, so many unknowns. There is a significant time difference between this reality and my own. For the people here, it has been three years since we thwarted the Borg invasion. Back home, it has been three weeks. If that rate is constant, and I age one year here for every week that passes back home…"

He shivered and shook his head.

"No. I will not think about that. But… How did I get here, Guinan? What happened to me? If you know anything…anything at all..."

Guinan lowered her eyes to the table.

"I can't say for certain," she said. "But I sense there is a purpose to this. If I had to make a guess, I'd say you're here…to return a favor."

"A favor?" Data frowned. "Whose favor? What does that mean?"

"Have you had a chance to take a look at your counterpart yet?"

"No," he said, and cleared his throat. "It's not an easy thing, you know. To face something like that. I mean, it's one thing to understand…that he's a machine. That he's…dead. Quite another to see it for real."

Guinan nodded.

"I have a feeling," she said, "this whole situation is less a mystery than a test."

"A test? Someone is testing…what? Me? Why?"
"I'm afraid I don't have those answers."

"...the hell..." Data muttered and stood so suddenly his chair nearly toppled over. He spun to face the window and raked his fingers through his hair until it stood in all directions.

"Why can no one in this damned universe give me a straight answer?!" he exclaimed. "I thought you were supposed to be my friend, Guinan."

"I am your friend, Data."

"Then help me!" he cried.

Guinan stood and glided over to touch his arm.

"Before I can help you any further," she said, "you'll need to find the strength to help yourself."

Data stared at her, his expression wide and vulnerable. Then, he turned on his heel and stormed out of the room...leaving his jacket behind.

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References include TNG: "The Outrageous Okona" and "The Best of Both Worlds."
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Six

Geordi strode into Ten Forward at 0703, fully expecting to find Danny Soong already standing at the bar waiting for him. Data had been meticulously punctual, and while he'd often claimed to be incapable of annoyance, Geordi knew it had discomfited the android when someone he'd been waiting for showed up late.

The engineer smiled a little at the memories. Data always had been a worrier.

Ten Forward was a lot of things to a lot of people, mostly depending on the mood and time of day. Right now, it had the feeling of a breakfast café. The fresh, morning smells of coffee, orange juice, omelets, pancakes and toast filled the air. Civilians sat with their families, crew members sat in groups, often with their shift leaders, going over the duties and tasks of the coming day.

Geordi scanned the busy room, running through the entire spectrum, but he couldn't spot Danny's readings anywhere.

"Hey, Guinan," he said, walking up to the bar, where the hostess was working her antique cappuccino machine.

She glanced at him and seemed to sigh.

"If you're looking for Data," she said, "he's already been and gone. But, he left this."

She reached under the counter and pulled out Danny's leather jacket, folded so his communicator rested on top.

Geordi took it with a frown.

"Are you saying he walked out?" he said. "Why would he do that? I was only three minutes late."

Guinan shook her head.

"He was here hours ago, when I first came in to set up shop. I found him asleep in that chair." She pointed, and went back to her coffee-making.

Geordi furrowed his brow.

"I don't understand this guy," he said. "Did you know I found him in the cybernetics lab last night? He took Lal's brain apart. Actually took off her head and deconstructed her brain. It's there now, spread out all over the table under a protective energy shield. But, when I asked him to take a look at Data, he practically flipped out."

"Well, wouldn't you?" Guinan said. She slid the frothy cappuccinos to the two security officers at the end of the bar, then glided toward Geordi.

"You're expecting him to take all this like an android, while he's just doing his level best to take it like a man," she said. "He's searching for stability, for something real he can hold on to, in a world where everything he thought was familiar is suddenly strange and frightening - including you and
me. He came here last night half hoping I could wave a magic wand and send him home. I'm afraid I had to disappoint him."

"Do you know how he got here?" Geordi asked.

She closed her eyes and pressed her lips tightly together.

"He wants to help, Geordi," she said. "Just, don't push him. He pushes himself hard enough already."

"Great," Geordi said, sighed. "Just great. So, any idea where he might have gone?"

"I'd guess somewhere he can feel safe. In control."

"So, basically, he could be anywhere. And since I have his communicator, I can't get the computer to track him for me. Thanks a lot, Guinan."

"Geordi," she said.

He turned back to her.

"Data needs a friend, not a monitor. Don't ask him to be what he's not."

"'Data,'" Geordi scoffed. "You mean 'Danny,' don't you." He frowned and draped the jacket over his arm. "I'll catch you later, Guinan."

******

Danny wasn't in his assigned quarters. He wasn't in the cybernetics lab or any of the smaller observation lounges on the residential decks. He wasn't in the arboretum or the gym. The better part of an hour had gone by in fruitless, frustrated searching before Geordi finally thought to check the holodeck logs.

Danny had signed out Holodeck Three just after 0500 hours. When Geordi got there, he found the program was still running. It was a custom program Danny had designed to some very specific specifications.

"Oh no," he muttered. "Please don't let this guy turn out to be another Barclay…"

Some four years ago, one of Geordi's officers, Lt. Reg Barclay, had developed a self-destructive habit of disappearing into holodeck-generated fantasy worlds whenever the real world got too stressful for him to handle. The captain had assigned Geordi to draw out the shy engineer, to encourage him to confront and overcome the anxieties that had driven him to detach from reality and hide away in the first place. From what he'd seen of Danny, he was a pretty high-strung guy. If Danny was following that same escapist pattern…

Geordi stormed through the heavy double doors, fully expecting to encounter a simulated version of Danny's home reality.

Instead, he found himself…essentially…in a blank holodeck: a cube-shaped grid of black squares and yellow stripes. Off in the back, facing the far left corner, a battered-looking brown couch hulked in front of an old-style blackboard covered all over with chalked symbols, equations, and complicated snatches of computer code. A waist-high computer console stood beside it, and over that floated a slowly spinning holographic model of a positronic brain, about five times larger than the real thing.
Geordi moved closer, his VISOR picking up the heat signature of a lone human curled up on the couch. He seemed to be fast asleep, his breathing slow and regular.

Geordi leaned over him, not sure if he should shake him or leave the man to sleep. He'd left the cybernetics lab after midnight, after all, and if he'd been working in here since five…

"Danny?"

Danny came alive with a startled snort, lurching upright and staring around in blank disorientation.

"Huh-what? Where… Geordi!"

He jumped to his feet, running his hands over his bristly face, his wild hair. He yawned hugely and shook the sleep out of his head.

"Whoa… What time is it?"

"Nearly nine. –But, it's OK, really!" Geordi hurried to add when he saw the man's horrified expression.

"Oh, God… Oh, Geordi, I am so sorry. I didn't mean to fall asleep like that. I should have set the computer to alert me…"

"No, Danny, don't worry about it. Honestly," Geordi said, and held out his jacket. "Here, I think you forgot this."

"Oh, yeah…" Danny took the jacket with a sheepish grimace and sank back onto the couch, rubbing his eyes with his palms.

"Please don't think this is me," he spoke into his hands. "This is not me…sleeping late…missing appointments… I never would have let something like this happen back on my Enterprise. I am usually much more competent. There is no excuse for this level of unprofessionalism."

"Danny, come on. It's fine," Geordi said, starting to realize what Guinan had been trying to tell him. "So, what have you been doing in here?"

"What, this?" Danny said, glancing at his chalkboard and computer console. "I was attempting to trace the physical and programmatic manifestations of your Data's cognitive development. A positronic matrix is not a static thing, you know. It's equipped with learning algorithms and the ability to create and build upon physical neural links. His brain's changed a lot from the time these schematics were drawn. Here, look."

He got up and unrolled a huge sheet of blue paper over the console. Geordi recognized it as a holographic printout of the initial scans Starfleet had made of Data when he applied to the academy.

"Using these basic blueprints as a baseline, I went back through your Data's diagnostic logs and got the computer to build me an oversized composite model, demonstrating the progression of his neural pathway development over the past thirty-odd years."

He gestured to the huge, floating brain, blinking red and green and yellow in the dim light of the holodeck grid.

"With this animated model serving as a control, I figured it would be easier for us to spot any anomalies when we go to look at the real thing today. In fact, I was hoping we might be able to bring him in here…if you think that would be all right. Unlike the cybernetics lab, the environment here
can be precisely controlled, and I can get the computer to replicate any instruments or materials we might need."

Geordi stared at the spinning hologram, his lips parting in amazement as he realized just what Danny had done. This wasn't merely a computer-simulated image, it was a tangible, hands-on, interactive tool. A perfect replica brain, linked in with the ship's computer, that could be dissected, disassembled, altered, resized, reassembled, and tested for various functions without any risk to Data. He'd never have guessed the holodeck would be capable of creating something so incredibly sophisticated...yet, here it was.

"Danny…" he breathed. "Danny, this is amazing. You programmed this in just a few hours?"

"The information was readily available," Danny said. "Apparently, your Data uses the same password for his personal files as I do."

Geordi glanced at him.

"So, you're a Holmes fan too?"

"Indubitably," Danny said, and smiled. "And don't look at me like that. I needed access to his diagnostic records to design the model, and I did not think it was right to wake you. Besides, there is nothing really new here. This set-up is quite similar to a program I designed to help separate Captain Picard from the Borg Collective."

"What do you mean?" Geordi asked.

Danny pointed to his blackboard. Geordi stared for a long time, not understanding.

Then it clicked.

That computer code Danny had scrawled in the corner - that wasn't for Data. It was for a modification to the holodeck computer.

"We had very limited time," Danny said, his eyes distant and his head slightly tilted, as if he were actually watching the memory play out as he spoke. "Far too little to devise and build a physical device. So, I had the captain brought to the holodeck and reprogrammed the computer to allow me to implement a direct, physical positronic link from the main computer core to Captain Picard's Borg implants. Once established, we used the link to access the Borg subspace signals...and put the Borg to sleep."

He smiled a rather wolffish smile, then turned his gaze to Geordi.

"The Borg self-destructed soon after, and Captain Picard has since made a nearly complete recovery. But I thought, if the interlink program worked then...why not try it here as well? If it works, it could prove a highly effective diagnostic tool."

He glanced back at his model, then at Geordi, seeming a little tentative.

"So… You really do approve of this?" he said. "You think it could be effective?"

"Danny, I think it's brilliant!" Geordi gushed. "To be honest, I was a little nervous you might be planning to deconstruct Data's brain the way you did Lal's. But with this model…"

"The structure of your Data's adult positronic brain is exceedingly more sophisticated than his Lal's infant brain," Danny said. "She was only operational for approximately two weeks before her
shutdown, so there are far fewer pathways to trace and, if necessary, excise. I fear I would not trust myself to perform a similar operation on your Data. In fact, I would avoid direct physical tampering if I had a choice. Hopefully, the problem can be identified and repaired with a minimum of invasive procedures."

"Agreed," Geordi said, and grinned. Geordi knew he shouldn't say this, but he couldn't help thinking that, standing there, in the dim light of the console, his untamed hair sticking out in all directions, Danny looked the very image of Data's father, Noonian Soong. Instead, he said, "You must be pretty hungry after all this work. That invitation to Ten Forward's still open, if you're willing."

Danny nodded.

"Thank you, Geordi."

He brought a hand to his rough chin.

"But I am a mess," he said, trying and failing to smooth back his sleep-rumpled hair. "Would you allow me a few minutes to grab a sonic shower and a shave?"

Geordi's lips twitched involuntarily as the sight of Danny rubbing his chin brought back the memory of the one time Data had tried to grow a beard. He could practically hear his friend's voice in his head:

…when I stroke the beard, thusly, do I not appear more…intellectual…

With great effort, Geordi swallowed an explosive snicker, covering his twitching expression with a quick nod.

"Yeah, of course," he said. "You want to go back to your quarters…?"

"That is not necessary. The computer can provide a functional facility here. I'll just be a moment."

Striding across the room, he called, "Computer, re-instate bathroom."

A door appeared and Danny disappeared through it, locking it behind him.

Geordi stared after him for a moment, bemused, then walked over to sit on the couch, his gaze fixed on the floating, blinking, mechanical brain.

Guinan was right. Danny's personality was similar to Data's, and he had that same awkward, analytical, oddly distanced manner to him, but he was as human as they came, bogged down with all the biological functions, physical frailties, and emotional hangups that made the human condition such a daily joy for all concerned. He was, in a nutshell, everything Geordi's android friend had ever aspired to be.

Geordi sighed and lowered his head.

How would Data react to Danny? To witnessing his most coveted dream, a flesh and blood reality? Geordi knew Data couldn't feel envy, but he had seen the android fret, and mope, and brood.

Would it be kinder not to tell him? If he could convince Danny to pretend to be Data's father…

Geordi shook that thought away before it could coalesce. Guinan had warned him not to make Danny into someone he wasn't, and she was right. Danny was a sensitive, honest guy, and he deserved to be treated honestly in return. But, Geordi felt he still didn't know enough about this
Danny Soong to figure out who he really was; to understand what a human Data might actually mean...to acknowledge that the concept might not be as much of a contradiction as it had initially seemed.

Perhaps, Data really had been more human than anyone had given him credit for. Including his best friend...

Danny emerged from the bathroom looking much more like Data and much less like a mad scientist, his pale face smooth and his dark hair brushed neatly back, although a few errant strands hung down over his forehead. A sonic shower cleaned a person's clothes as well as their body, so even his t-shirt looked fresh and unwrinkled.

"Would you like to…" Danny offered politely, gesturing to the open door as he pulled on his jacket. Geordi shook his head.

"I'm fine for now, thanks," he said. "And we're not expected down in Engineering for another three hours. So, breakfast?"

"After you," Danny said, and followed his friend to the corridor, calling over his shoulder, "Computer, discontinue bathroom and save program."

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Chapter Seven

Danny brightened considerably as he and Geordi stepped off the turbolift to Deck Ten.

"Geordi, do you smell pancakes?" he asked excitedly, and took in a deep sniff. "I love fresh pancakes, made with real chicken eggs and topped with real, melty butter and maple syrup! Do you think, if I asked, Guinan might add some chocolate chips and bananas to the batter? When I was a student in Boston, I used to go to this little restaurant where—"

Geordi's combadge chirped, and Commander Riker's voice announced: "Attention, all senior staff. Please report to the Observation Lounge."

A moment later, Danny's combadge followed suit: "Commander Data, please report to the Observation Lounge."

Danny winced and tapped his communicator.

"Acknowledged, Commander."

He glanced at Geordi, childlike disappointment all over his face.

"No pancakes?"

Geordi pursed his lips to keep from chuckling.

"Nope," he said and clapped the man on the shoulder as they turned back to the lift they'd just left. "But, look on the bright side. Maybe all those tests they put you through yesterday have turned up a clue."

"That would be good," Danny said glumly. "But, I really am starving."

He tilted his head, his expression blooming with hope.

"Geordi! In my reality, Counselor Troi always sets up this fantastic sampler platter for morning meetings. Does your Counselor Troi replicate breakfast platters like that, because I really like those little quiche things. And the mini bagels. Oh, and those crispy oskoid fronds from Betazed—do you like those Geordi? Geordi? Geordi, why are you laughing?"

The lift doors slid closed before Geordi could recover enough breath to reply.

*******

No tempting breakfast platter awaited them at the meeting, only a coffee and tea dispenser and a depressingly small plate of miniature pastries. Danny helped himself to some tea and a couple of tiny chocolate croissants, but despite his best efforts to keep up a positive attitude, once the meeting began, a grumpy cloud soon settled over him, and stayed there.

The first line of business was to discuss the ongoing process of dismantling the research station, housing the research scientists, and analyzing their collected data. It was all very routine and very
tedious, but Danny paid polite attention to their problems until they finally got around to his.

Unfortunately, Dr. Crusher's much anticipated test results had turned up nothing he didn't already know. Her report just confirmed what he'd been saying all along.

Danny understood that was an important first step, finally having some hard, scientific data to back up his claims, but it was their apparent surprise that irritated him, as if they'd been doubting his story from the beginning.

"I've isolated Soong's quantum signature, Captain," Dr. Crusher had said, striding to the front of the room to play some animated visual aids on the screen behind the captain's chair. "As you can see from these diagrams, we have identified a quantum flux in Soong's cellular RNA that extends to the subatomic level. This fluctuation is asynchronous with normal matter. You see, all matter in the universe resonates at a quantum level with a unique signature. That signature is constant, a basic foundation of existence, and it can't be changed by any known process."

"What does that signify in this case, Doctor?" the captain had asked.

"There can be only one conclusion," Dr. Crusher had said, turning off the screen and returning to her seat. "This man, Danny Soong, originates from a different quantum universe."

Danny had rolled his eyes at the sheer obviousness of the findings, then sunk into a deeper funk as the discussion that followed made it increasingly clear that they really had no idea how to proceed. Several theories and postulations were thrown on the table and bandied back and forth, but none seemed worth pursuing. Danny had kept quiet, not sure whether or not he was supposed to speak since he was not a member of staff and had no official standing on the ship, but finally he couldn't take it anymore.

"Why don't we run a broad-spectrum scan?" he said, his sudden participation seeming to startle the gathered officers. For all he knew, they'd forgotten was sitting there.

"Please, go on, Commander," Picard said.

"You know my quantum signature now," Danny pointed out, struggling to tamp down his frustration. "So, why do we not just scan for it?"

"Danny," Geordi said, "I've been trying to explain, our scanners just aren't sensitive enough to pick up the remaining residuals of such minute quantum fluctuations. On top of that, the signature you're looking for resonates at a slight phase variance with our reality, creating destructive interference that essentially cancels it out."

"Then what am I doing here?" Danny countered. "If my reality's quantum wave function is canceled out so completely by your reality's quantum wave function then how the hell can I be sitting here, solid and breathing, within your quantum reality?"

"That's what we're trying to figure out!" Geordi said.

"No, no! The fact of my presence is not in dispute, and questioning it is only wasting time! The discussion at this point should not be about how I can be here, but how I arrived in the first place, where I arrived from, and how I can be returned," Danny snapped, and leaned forward over the table, his fingers laced together.

"Listen," he said, "even canceled waves leave an interference pattern, no matter how slight. A tomographic imaging scanner is capable of multiphasic resolution and could, theoretically, be used to detect that pattern. If you have one aboard – heck, even if you don't, we could modify the sensors to
scan the area of space the Enterprise was passing through when I arrived here for any sign of spatiotemporal weaknesses, rifts, or anomalies with a corresponding phase-shift resonance. And what about the transporter? I materialized here from somewhere, didn't I? You cannot have half a transporter cycle, can you? So, why don't we go back to the transporter records, run a deep scan, try to reconstruct the full cycle record and trace my quantum signature back to the initial point of dematerialization?"

Picard looked from Danny to his chief engineer.

"Mr. La Forge?"

Geordi widened his nostrils, shaking his head slightly as he thought through Danny's suggestions. Finally, he sat back and threw his hands up in a shrug.

"There's a lot of 'ifs' in there, sir," he said. "For one thing, tomography is about using penetrating waves to create a series of image 'slices,' then reconstructing the full picture. It's usually used for medical scans or geologic surveys. As far as I know a tomographic imaging scanner's never been used to scan for temporal or quantum anomalies. But," he admitted, "it's a place to start."

Picard nodded.

"Then make it so. And take Transporter Room Three offline until your scans are complete," he said, and indicated the meeting was over. "Commander Data," he called as the senior staff began to file from the room.

Danny glanced at Geordi, then approached the captain.

"Sir?"

Picard looked him over, from his jacket to his shoes.

"Has something happened to your uniform, Commander?"

"Commander Riker's summons caught me on my way to breakfast, sir," Danny told him. "There was no time to change."

Picard nodded.

"I realize you are a guest here, but visiting officers on my ship – especially those I have asked to participate in an ongoing investigation – are expected –"

"To dress the part. Understood, Captain. With your permission, I'll go—"

"Not quite yet, Mr. Data," Picard said. "Or is it 'Doctor'?"

Danny glared down at his shoes.

"What does it matter? It seems no one on this ship is comfortable acknowledging that I am Lt. Commander Data, not even Geordi, so just go ahead and call me whatever you want."

Picard's eyes narrowed.

"Sit down, Commander."

Danny fought to suppress a grimace, but joined Picard at the table.
"I realize this can't be easy for you…"

Danny snorted.

"That is an understatement."

"But, that is no excuse to vent your frustrations on me or my crew," Picard said sharply. "Now, I want you to talk with Counselor Troi."

Danny flinched.

"Again? But, sir, Commander La Forge is expecting me to assist him with…"

"Talk with Troi first," Picard said firmly. "Data, none of us can pretend to understand the emotional turmoil you are going through right now. I want you to understand I am sympathetic to your feelings. But, bottling up your anxieties will help no one, and it certainly won't help you get home any faster. Am I understood, Commander?"

"Yes, sir," Danny acknowledged. "I just…"

He sighed.

"I apologize, sir. I would never have addressed my own captain in such a tone, and I should not have talked that way to you. I am grateful for all you are doing for me, and I will see the counselor. But…"

"Yes, Commander?"

Danny focused his eyes on his folded hands.

"What if we cannot solve this mystery before your work with the research station is complete?" he asked. "What will happen to me then? Am I to accompany you to the Daystrom Institute? And, what of my career...my position on the Enterprise... Am I still considered to be a Starfleet Officer if I was trained in another reality?"

Picard straightened in his chair.

"As far as I am concerned, Commander, you're as much a Starfleet Officer as I am," he asserted. "As for your position, I have been in contact with Starfleet Command regarding your...unique...situation. If you wish to remain aboard the Enterprise, I will be willing to submit a recommendation, but I'm sure you're aware I can make no guarantees. Just know we will do all we can to find a way to return you home to your family before we need concern ourselves with anything long term."

Danny nodded slowly.

"Thank you, Captain."

"You may go, Mr. Data."

"Sir," Danny acknowledged, then rose and strode from the room.

*******

Danny's uniform was in his assigned quarters.

He walked up to the door, staying just out of range of the motion detectors that would trigger it to slide open...
...then turned sharply and strode straight back to the turbolift.

"Ship's Stores," he said, his face burning with embarrassment as the lift started moving. No one had witnessed his odd behavior, but he was still breathing heavily, his hands shaking slightly.

His intelligent, analytical mind told him he was being irrational, that his reaction was ridiculous, immature, and unbecoming a decorated and responsible senior officer.

Still, there was no way he was going to open the doors to his quarters.

No way at all.

Danny knew the exact reason for his reluctance. He knew it all too well. But, he also knew that knowing didn't do a thing to change how he felt.

"Schrödinger's Cat," he whispered.

The turbolift let him off and he marched down the hall to Ship's Stores, muttering the same words over and over and over again...words he was barely aware he was saying: "Schrödinger's Cat. Schrödinger's Cat, Schrödinger's Cat, Schrödinger's Cat..."

"Sir?"

"Hm?"

Danny jumped and broke out of his half-conscious mantra, blinking blankly at the young Petty Officer who stood behind the storeroom console.

"Sir, were you saying something?"

"No, nothing," he said quickly. "I was just...um..."

His eyes flitted all around the room, but refused to land on the young woman's face.

"I need a uniform," he blurted.

"Then I'll need some identification," the woman retorted. "Name, rank, and Starfleet registration number, please."

"Lt. Commander Da- I mean, Daniel Soong. Registration 0045-0271A2," he rattled off, still unable to bring himself to check her expression. She must think I'm some kind of nut, he thought bitterly as she tapped in his information.

"Wait...this is Lt. Commander Data's registration number," the woman said.

"Yes, that's me. I am Lt. Commander Data."

The woman seemed surprised.

"No... Oh, by the Prophets.. You're him, aren't you! The human from the alternate universe! I've only seen Data a few times, but... Wow, you look just like him! Hey, Sarah!"

"No, no, please, don't call anyone else over," Danny said, his posture hunching in humiliation. "Just, please, can I have the uniform I requested?"

"Right away, sir," the woman said and strode away to fill his order, leaving Danny silently cursing...
the Starfleet regulation that official uniforms could only be replicated by personnel in Ship's Stores using a special prefix keycode.

She came back about half a minute later and laid a neatly folded gold and black uniform on the console, the insignia of a Lt. Commander already pinned to the collar.

"Here you are, Commander," she said, and he could hear the smile in her voice. He just hoped she wasn't laughing at him. He grabbed the uniform and turned to go.

"Um..." the woman called after him. "Sir? I know officers and enlisted personnel aren't supposed to...well...fraternize, but if you're free for a drink sometime, maybe...?"

Danny frowned. Was he hearing what he thought he was hearing?

For the first time, he looked the young Petty Officer in the face. She was Bajoran, and even younger than he'd thought, probably little more than twenty-one or twenty-two years old. He stared for a moment with his head slightly tilted, struggling to determine if he really was reading her intentions correctly. Flushed cheeks, slight smile, twirling her curly brown hair in a way that subtly exposed her neck...

All definite signals of flirtation.

Startled, he blurted, "I'm married," and practically ran back to the turbolift, leaving the young Bajoran and her friend Sarah giggling after him.

******

Danny hadn't felt so stupid and out-of-place since his last starship assignment, on the Trieste. It was as if all the hard-won confidence he had gained in his years aboard his Enterprise was evaporating away, leaving him a self-doubting pillar of twisted nerves. Unwilling to even contemplate returning to his quarters, Danny changed in the gym's shower room and tossed his civilian gear into a waste receptacle, where the entire outfit dematerialized back into atoms for reuse elsewhere. By the time he'd rushed to Counselor Troi's office, he was out of breath and had to smooth back his unruly hair.

He sighed. His first full day in this awful reality was turning into a real pain. True, it was mostly his fault, him and his irrational aversions and impulses, but it wasn't even 1030 hours yet! Maybe things would be easier if he wasn't so damn tired...

For the first time, Danny found himself actually looking forward to a time when he could be alone with the broken androids, his scattered, frightened mind completely focused on the complex puzzle of their respective malfunctions. Until then, he'd have to deal with people. People and their expectations. People and their judgments. People and their knowing, prying stares...

And, speaking of Troi...

Danny took a bracing breath and pressed the button to signal his presence. A moment later, the doors slid open and the reluctant patient stepped into the counselor's office, still muttering, "Schrödinger's Cat..."

To Be Continued...
Chapter Nine

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Eight

"Good morning, Data. Please, have a seat."

Danny nodded and sat on the couch she indicated, his spine straight and his hands folded in his lap.

Counselor Troi's office was designed to be soothing, with soft colors and gentle, warm lighting, but Danny was not impressed by the ambiance. He turned his eyes to a delicate water sculpture and waited impatiently for Troi to start with the grilling.

Instead of questioning him, though, she stood and walked over to the replicator.

"I hope you don't mind if I order a snack," she said. "I'm afraid I missed out on breakfast this morning. Would you like something?"

"Well, I…"

"Honestly, you'd be doing me a favor if you joined me. I hate to eat alone."

Danny blinked. He recognized what she was doing. No doubt she'd picked up on his disappointment when he'd seen the pitiful refreshment plate at the morning meeting, and this was her way of subtly breaking the ice between them - as well as an attempt to improve his mood by raising his diminished glucose levels. It was a manipulative offer, but he had to admit, the prospect of turning a required therapy session into a shared meal was not unwelcome. In fact, he rather liked the idea.

"Um…all right, then," he said. "I'd like some pancakes, please. Banana pancakes. With butter and maple syrup."

Troi smiled and placed the order, along with a smoked fish, muskfruit, and oskoid salad for herself.

"Anything to drink? Tea? Coffee?"

"Tea, please," Danny said. "I…I've never managed to acquire a taste for coffee."

"Even with cream and sugar?"

He shrugged.

"Tasha is the coffee drinker in our family. She has often said she would be unable to function in the morning without a mug of strong raktajino."

"But not you," Troi said, setting the replicated food out on her coffee table, along with utensils and napkins.

"No," Danny shook his head. "I find the bitter taste unpalatable, and the high caffeine content, which keeps her awake, actually makes me drowsy. Tasha often teases me about that. She believes it happens because I am so high strung to begin with; the caffeine overstimulates my system to the point that it knocks me out. I have never tested her theory scientifically, but I can attest that it is not a pleasant feeling. I would not choose to drink coffee as a means of combating insomnia, for example."
"Do you often get insomnia?"

"Yes," he said. "But I have never needed much sleep, even when I was a child."

Danny finished stirring his tea and met her gaze with his own.

"Before you question me any further along these lines, I believe you should know that my own Counselor Troi is well aware of my condition and its accompanying symptoms and, as it has never interfered with the performance of my duties, she has always trusted me to handle my anxiety, and my insomnia, as I see fit."

Troi nodded.

"Then, I take it you would not be open to discussing possible medications—"

"I would not," Danny said firmly and fixed his attention on cutting his pancakes.

Troi nodded again, but her expression was troubled.

"Data," she said. "How long have you known that you have Asperger's syndrome?"

Danny fumbled his fork.

"You...you can tell?"

"Beverly picked up on it, during her scans," she said.

"Yeah, well, I would appreciate it if Beverly and you and anyone else who knows would please keep that information to themselves," he said, unable to keep his face from burning red. "So, I'm nervous. So, I'm anxious. I have always been anxious. But my condition has never impeded my performance during a crisis. Never. I have handled bizarre and dangerous situations before, and I am handling this situation now."

"I believe that you are," Troi said. "In fact, I think you are much stronger than you give yourself credit for, Mr. Data."

Danny tilted his head.

"You do?"

Troi smiled.

"It was not my doubts or the captain's doubts that brought you here, Data, but your own. You are worried about your ability to function now that you have been separated from your familiar surroundings. In fact, you worry so much about our perceptions of you, that you provoke the very reactions that you dread. We're not here to judge you, Data. We just want to understand you, and to help you get back home."

Danny closed his eyes and lowered his chin to his chest.

"I know..." he said quietly. "I...I understand that, and I am sorry I have been so...defensive. It is just...after all I have been through..."

He glanced up, his blue eyes rimmed with red.

"I have had to fight so hard...so hard...at every step of my career. And even now, there are those who
believe my admission to Starfleet was...a mistake. The fight has made me...wary...of those I do not
know, and who do not yet know me."

Troi frowned.

"I don't understand," she said. "You're obviously a bright, talented officer. Who would possibly have
opposed your application?"

"There was a man...a neurologist... His name was Bruce Maddox. He opposed my admission on the
grounds that my condition made me prone to panic attacks, which could prove a fatal flaw on deep
space assignments. His was a lone voice, however. I passed every psych test the board threw at me."

Troi sat back in her chair, startled by the parallel with the Data she knew. A Bruce Maddox had also
opposed the admission of her android friend to Starfleet, claiming Data was not a sentient being. But,
that Maddox had been a cyberneticist.

"Data," she said, "the very fact that you made it through despite his protests only proves-"

"Yes, I know, I know, but that wasn't the end of it," Danny said, lacing his fingers together to hide
their trembling. "I...I'm sorry, I don't want to talk about this."

"Did he try to transfer you?" she asked gently, drawing on his roiling emotions and her own Data's
experiences to form an educated guess. "Did he try to separate you from the Enterprise, take away
your position as a command officer?"

Danny rubbed his eyes hard and frowned at her.

"How did you know?"

Troi knew paralleling Danny's trauma with the harassment his android counterpart had endured from
Maddox would only put him on the defensive. The pain he felt was unique to him; lumping his
experience together with the persecution her Data had faced would not be fair to either of them. So,
she said, "Autism in any form is exceedingly rare in the Federation. Much of the literature on the
condition focuses only on the most extreme and unusual cases. Finding you, observing how you face
challenges and interact with the world around you... Maddox must have felt he'd found a diamond
among the rocks."

Danny raised an eyebrow.

"A diamond? More like a lab rat with some unusual tumor," he scoffed. "He wanted me to
participate in some experiment to study the development of human intelligence. He thought by
studying the way my brain was wired, he might be able to find a way to adapt my analytical talents
to others without all the...negative emotional hangups..." He shuddered. "I was expected to take
medications that would numb my anxieties - tranquilize my soul! - and he was always vague about
whether his 'tests' would involve any...invasive procedures. When I refused to accept the transfer,
Maddox took me to court."

He looked up at her, his pale face drawn and blotched with red.

"You know, before that trial, I had fought and, ultimately, shut down a planet-sized arsenal
programmed to seek and destroy all life forms on its surface or in orbit. I had sealed a temporal rift - a
literal crack in time - faced up to the taunts and challenges of an omnipotent entity who could have
destroyed all humanoid life with a thought had we failed his test. But until I stepped into that
courtroom, I had never, never felt so frightened. So...primally exposed. Maddox was threatening my
mind, my rights, my...my self. He honestly believed he was fully justified in treating me like...like a
specimen, a...a thing...just because my 'condition' was so rare. If he had won..."

"But he didn't," Troi said, reaching over his cooling pancakes to squeeze his tightly folded hands. "You beat him, Data. You forced Starfleet to look past Maddox's abstract proposals and recognize you for the man you are."

Danny swallowed hard.

"Yes..." he whispered. "At first, my victory was like an affirmation - that I had been right to trust in Starfleet's ideals, its promise of a community of mutual respect, despite my father's claims of Federation hypocrisy. After the trial, Tasha was so proud of me and I...I had never felt so confident, so...so honestly happy with my life, my friends, my future. Tasha and I were married within the month, and when Lal was born the following year it didn't even occur to us that it might have been wiser to keep her medical records confidential. I'd actually been a little glad she had inherited a very mild case of Asperger's from me...that, as she grew, we would share a similar understanding of our world. We just didn't expect...anyone would care. But, our little Lalena was only two weeks old when Admiral Haftel arrived from Starfleet Medical with his proposal to take our daughter to a 'special facility' where her development could be 'better monitored.'"

"Oh, Data..." Troi whispered.

"Captain Picard gave us his best defense," Danny said. "It took several weeks, but Tasha and I finally managed to convince Starfleet to leave Lal in our care. Still, that experience...even more than my trial...made us question Starfleet's values. It shook the core of everything we thought we'd believed. For a time, we seriously considered leaving Starfleet; taking our daughter to some colony world on the outer rim and throwing our careers back in their arrogant, bigoted faces. But, running away would not have solved the problem.

"These terrible things, these repeated threats to my life, to my daughter's life, to my family... They hurt us. Everyone who knew us was affected, and the media attention garnered by the controversy went far beyond that. The trials these high ranking Starfleet representatives put us through cut us deeply, shook our faith in ourselves and the organization we had pledged our lives to serve and protect. But, in shaking that faith, they taught us that Starfleet is not perfect. It is not a system to be idolized without question. Rather, it is a reflection of the imperfections of the beings that make decisions within its vast bureaucracy. Only by forcing those flawed individuals to face, recognize, and overcome their own prejudices can the organization ever hope to live up to its own ideals, and earn the respect and admiration of its citizens. It is as Worf said at the time: by fighting back, we made sure the Federation did not veer from the path of honor. And, as long as Tasha and I serve, we must make it our duty to ensure it never does."

Troi smiled.

"You and Tasha must be very close."

"We are family," Danny said.

"Does she also serve on the bridge?"

"No," Danny said. "Tasha heads the Emergency Medical Services department. She coordinates rescue operations, acting as a liaison between security and sickbay. Her office is two doors down from Dr. Crusher's, on Deck 12."

"I see," Troi said, intrigued. "We don't have an Emergency Medical Services department on this ship. Our medical and security teams are separate."
"Establishing the department was Tasha's idea," Danny said. "She turned down the position of Security Chief to make it a reality. Her coordination efforts and training courses have proved so efficient, similar EMS departments have been established on other Starfleet vessels, and they may soon become standard."

"You must be very proud."

"Extremely," Danny said, and smiled. "Tasha is an extraordinary person. Her vision and her passion has saved many lives."

"So, you admired her from the start."

"I had read her EMS proposal before we met aboard the Enterprise," he said, "and I was the first to approve it, followed by the captain, and then Commander Riker, after the Farpoint mission that marked our maiden voyage together. Tasha appreciated my support and invited me to her celebratory dinner. We found we shared few common interests, and our personalities are practically polar opposites, but I knew there was something about her I could trust, implicitly, and she felt the same way about me. I have never thought of her as anything less than family. She is...very special to me."

"The prospect of being away from her, and from your daughter, must be-"


"Handling something like that can be very tricky," Troi said. "People in those situations cope with the stress...the fear...in many different ways."

Danny shrugged and chewed his pancakes.

"I think the way that you have found is quite unique." She stared at him until she could catch his eyes with her own. "Schrödinger's Cat?"

Danny blinked and looked away, quickly.

"I don't want to talk about that."

"Because, talking about it would make it real."

He squeezed his eyes shut.

"If you know that, then you should understand why I don't want to talk about it."

"Data," she said. "You have to sleep somewhere. You can't keep avoiding your quarters."

"Yes I can," he mumbled.

"Geordi told me how he helped you rearrange the furniture there," she said. "How you refolded the towels, changed the lighting. You were setting it up for them, weren't you. So you could imagine they were there with you."

"Not physically there," Danny mumbled. "I know I am alone here. That they are safe back home in our own reality. But...the feeling that...that perhaps they had just stepped out... That...that the room was just...standing ready. Waiting for their return..."

"You don't want to disturb that illusion," Troi said. "The possibility. If you open the door..."

"Open the door and there can be only one reality," Danny whispered. "But, as long as it remains
closed, who is to say my family is not there? In a multiverse of infinite possibilities, when you close the box, when you stop observing the stark realities, all you have left is probability."

"That is a rationalization," Troi pointed out.

"I am aware of that," Danny said. "But, for now, it serves the function of keeping the loneliness at bay, and it buffers that pain far more effectively than any pill or hypospray you or Dr. Crusher could prescribe. May I leave now?"

"Where are you going to stay tonight?" she asked.

"I will cross that bridge when I come to it," he said, and stood. "In the meantime, I have a great deal of work to do. With your permission, Counselor...?"

Troi pursed her lips, but got to her feet and strode to her computer panel.

"I'll let you go for now," she said, "but I want you back here again tomorrow, same time. You're going to have to face this, Data, whether it's now or later. Until you do, the pain and fear you've been rationalizing away will be hanging over you like a sword, waiting to drop."

"With luck, it will not have the chance," Danny said. "For, I do not intend to remain here long enough for my rationalizing buffer to falter. Thank you for the breakfast, and the tea. I believe our talk has done me some good."

Troi gave him a small, acknowledging smile, but before he made it to the door, she called, "Data?"

"Yes, Counselor?"

"Do you really believe you can find out what caused our Data's system failure?"

Danny paused, considering.

"I can make no promises, Counselor," he said. "But from what I have learned so far, studying the construction of both Lal and her father, I believe there is a very good chance."

"Thank you," Troi said, allowing the depth of her sincerity to show in her eyes.

Danny nodded once, and strode from the room.

*****

A man was pacing the cybernetics lab when Danny strode in later that evening. He was tall and slim with pale, thinning hair, and he moved his limbs and fingers in quick, anxious jerks.

For a moment, Danny was gripped with a powerful urge to back right out again, and pray the man hadn't seen him. After spending a disheartening day in Engineering struggling to navigate the stressful awkwardness of working among familiar-looking strangers who half-expected him to think, react, and compute like an android, he'd really been looking forward to some time alone.

None of his ideas were panning out. The transporter had showed no record of his arrival, at all; and, even though the tomographic scans wouldn't be complete until morning, it was becoming pretty clear that, if there ever had been an anomaly, any trace of it had already vanished.

He wanted to scream. He wanted to press his face against the cool, smooth wall and cry. But, more than that, he ached to dive into the disorderly mess of Lal's deconstructed brain and sort out all the pieces, all the problems, one by one by one, until every part was exactly the way it was supposed to
But he couldn't.

Because the man was staring at him.

Danny couldn't just ignore him, and he didn't want to make a bad impression. So, he blinked back his feelings, straightened his posture, and decided to smile.

"Hello," Danny greeted. "I don't believe we've met. I'm Danny Soong, but everyo- Well... Everyone back home calls me 'Data.'"

"Uh...Ba-Barclay," the man stammered.

Danny tilted his head, noticing Barclay's wide eyes, his sweaty palms. Was this man afraid of something? Of him?

Curious now, and a little concerned, Danny adopted a friendly expression and a light, teasing tone he'd learned from Commander Riker.

"Just 'Barclay'?" he prodded.

The man released a bashful laugh, and Danny nodded, satisfied he wasn't the cause of the man's discomfort.

"No, well..." Barclay said, and straightened. "OK, let's try this again. I'm Lt. Reginald Barclay. Systems Engineer and Diagnostician. You can call me 'Reg.' Uh, that is, if you want, sir. I, uh... I've been down on the surface, helping with...with the, uh, dismantling the station's laboratory, but when I heard..."

He took in a long breath through his nose, then smiled broadly and held out his hand.

"I'd like to help," he said, "if I can. Data is...was...is... Well, he's a friend of mine."

Barclay squinted.

"You really... You really do look extraordinarily like him."

Danny nodded and shook the man's hand.

"So I've heard," he said wryly, starting to like this earnest engineer. There was something about him, something familiar...

Danny had become friends with several psychiatrists while in college, friends who had kept in contact with him throughout his career. At least once a year, they invited him back to his alma mater to speak and interact with current students who suffered from various anxiety disorders, ranging from bashful shyness to severe agoraphobia. Most were very bright and engaging, but very few of them had believed themselves confident enough to apply to Starfleet, as he had.

Barclay's manner and hesitant way of talking strongly reminded Danny of those students: self-doubting, worried about failing to live up to their own expectations, the expectations of others. Frightened of change, of finding themselves lost in an unfamiliar situation; the dread of being caught unprepared. If he was like them, with his expertise as a diagnostic systems engineer, Barclay could easily have found a position doing research or laboratory work on a planet, starbase, or shipyard - a position that would offer him a steady, reliable routine, where change came only slowly, allowing
plenty of time to adapt.

Instead, Barclay was there, on the Enterprise, a deep space exploration vessel that was positively infamous for encountering the strange, the dangerous, and the unexpected.

Danny regarded the man, trying to see past his twitching expression and his fidgeting feet to the determination that kept him there, looking Danny straight in the eye. To be there, to be willing to hammer his way out of his nervous shell day after day after day, he had to be a far, far tougher personality than he appeared. And, if Barclay really was a friend of the mechanical Data, who was he to decline his offer to help?

"Very well," Danny said. "I had been planning to..."

He'd intended to say 'continue to work on Lal,' but she was his project, and he wasn't in the mood to share. He had promised Geordi to look at the mechanical Data, though, and since Barclay was there, and willing...

"Uh, request a site-to-site transport of your Data's body from..." he gestured vaguely toward the crypt, still unable to look directly at it without shivering, "...to Holodeck Three, but now you're here we can use an antigrav sled and bring some extra equipment along. Would you care to...to open the..."

Barclay nodded and strode across the room to open the crypt door.

Danny turned away, busying himself gathering equipment so he wouldn't have to watch while Barclay pulled out the metal table and carefully transferred the android's still, sheet-draped body to a long, floating antigravity sled. He only rejoined the engineer when he began to maneuver the sled toward the door.

"Wait," he said.

Tasha had once told him there were two kinds of swimmers: those who sidled into the water, shivering with each step, and those who dove straight in. Danny had never been one to sidle. He might avoid, debate, or procrastinate for a while, but if he was going to take the plunge, he was going all the way.

Placing the tools and scanners at the foot of the sled, Danny stepped closer, holding in his breath until, with one swift motion, he pulled down the sheet that covered the android's face.

"Shiee-gosh!" he yelped, jumping reflexively back, his body wracked by a harsh shudder.

Barclay started in alarm.

"Commander? Are you..."

"That's not me!" Danny exclaimed, still gulping for air after his shock. "He's not- That's Archie!"

"What? Who's Archie?"

"He's...he's an android my father built...long ago... But...but I don't understand," Danny said, staring wide-eyed at the android's white-gold complexion. "If this is...Data... My counterpart... Why does he look so..."

Barclay looked enlightened.
"You thought he would look more human?"

"Everyone said he looked just like me. I just assumed..." Danny took a deep breath and sighed.

"Well," he said, and almost smiled. "This might just make things a little easier. I was having a very hard time imagining what it would be like to operate on my own brain...even a positronic version. But, now I know he looks like Archie, and not like me... Yes. I really think I can do this. Are you ready, Mr. Barclay?"

The engineer nodded.

"All set, sir."

"Then let's get him to the holodeck!"

******

The repeated signal of an incoming communication jolted Geordi from a deep and much-needed sleep. Groping for his VISOR, the exhausted engineer groaned and slapped the com panel by his bed. As he did, he glanced at the clock readout.

0316.

He fell back on his pillow and groaned again.

"La Forge here," he mumbled. "What's the emergency?"

"No emergency, Geordi," came Danny's voice. "I just thought you would like to know we found it."

"What?" Geordi said, blearily blinking the sleep from his brain. "You found...huh?"

"I found the cause of your Data's shutdown," Danny reported. "That is, Mr. Barclay and I found it. It is a rather peculiar code cluster, most likely alien in origin, that has been acting on your Data's systems like an old-style computer virus. I believe I can remove the infiltrating code and repair the damage it has caused him, but I felt I should contact you before I went ahead with the procedure. In case you wished to be present. In addition, I have a few questions I would like to ask regarding any symptoms he may have experienced before his shutdown. Such information may help me stabilize his system and prevent any future recurrences."

"Yeah... Yeah, of course!" Geordi exclaimed, jumping out of the bed and fighting his way out of his pajamas and into a fresh uniform. "I'll be right there!"

"I will wait for you, Geordi," Danny said, and broke the connection.

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References include TNG: "The Measure of a Man," "The Arsenal of Freedom," "We'll Always Have Paris," "The Offspring," and "Encounter at Farpoint."
Chapter 10

Chapter Nine

Data's body lay on a padded biobed, long cords stretching from open access panels in his skull to the central console which, in turn, was linked to the oversized diagnostic brain model that floated overhead.

The android had been interred in his dress uniform, which he still wore, the rows of colorful service ribbon bars under his communicator symbolizing some of Starfleet's highest honors.

The Legion of Honor. The Star Cross. The Starfleet Decoration for Gallantry. The Starfleet Medal of Honor…

"It will take approximately fifteen minutes for the computer to run a complete systems diagnostic," Danny said abstractedly, his sharp eyes following the lines and lines and lines of code scrolling across his console's monitor screen as the floating diagnostic brain blinked frenetically above him. "If no residual anomalies are found, I believe it will be safe to reinitialize his activating units."

Geordi nodded and stretched his stiff shoulders, struggling to stifle a yawn.

"Great!" he said. "Then, you won't mind if I go grab a quick coffee."

"Please, be my guest," Danny said, his eyes never leaving the screen as he called out, "Computer: re-instate corner replicator."

Geordi smirked. This guy really was making himself at home here. But, he knew the captain certainly wouldn't approve of Danny setting up house in a holodeck, however he felt about his assigned quarters. It just wasn't…healthy.

"You want anything, Reg?" he said as he walked past the engineer to place his order, pausing only to pet Spot, who was curled up on the back of the battered old sofa. The orange cat had been staying with Barclay since Data's system crash, and with Geordi while Barclay was down on the surface, but the cat now lounged in the holodeck at Danny's request, since Danny said he'd be able to focus better knowing Spot was there.

Barclay stood between the prone android and the floating brain, his long fingers tapping at his chirping tricorder as he analyzed the thin, nearly transparent isolinear chip that now held the extracted virus program. When Geordi spoke, he glanced up with a lurch of surprise.

"Huh? What? Oh, uh, no. No, Commander. Nothing for me, please, sir," he said, and went back to work.

"Danny?"

"No thank you, Geordi. I am fine for the present."

So, Geordi slurped at his caffeine kick alone and shook his head at the busy pair.

It had taken the three of them more than four hours to track down the infiltrating virus, isolate all
affected code, erect a system of firewalls to prevent the virus from spreading from Data through the holographic diagnostics console to the main computer, and adapt a quarantine and removal program that wouldn’t wipe, impair or further corrupt any of Data’s own programming. Now, it was fast coming up on 0745, and Geordi had to fight to keep alert. Danny and Barclay, though, they seemed almost more focused now than they were during the day. Maybe there was something to be said for hyperactive nervous disorders. Then again, Danny had been up for almost two nights straight and, as for Barclay… Well, when they crashed, they were going to crash hard. Fortunately, Barclay had just finished his rotation on the surface and Geordi and Danny wouldn’t be expected in Engineering until afternoon shift, since he’d blocked off the morning to work on restoring Data.

Still, a little grogginess was a small price to pay for the hope of reviving his best friend.

The virus attacking Data was unlike anything the three experts had encountered before. It didn’t seem designed for any specific function, like mining or erasing information. It was just there: a strange, insanely complex polymorphic code that modified its decryption modules each time it replicated itself, piggybacking Data’s own programs as it moved from system to system, wreaking havoc everywhere it went. Its metamorphic properties had hidden it from Data’s self-diagnostic program, and from Geordi’s deepest and most thorough scans, until it was too late to stop the corrupted code from instigating a fatal systems crash. Only careful comparison with Danny’s sophisticated model had showed up the minute discrepancies between Data’s real code and the mutated piggyback virus and, even then, it would have been impossible for Geordi and Barclay to identify and isolate the thing’s myriad permutations without Danny’s intimate, if slightly rusty, understanding of his father’s positronic brain design – the workings of which even Data didn’t fully comprehend.

"What I still don't understand," Geordi said as he walked back to the console, feeling headachy and only slightly more awake, "is just how Data caught this thing in the first place. I mean, where the hell did it come from? And why just him? Why haven't any of the ship’s systems shown signs of this infection?"

"I do not know," Danny said, and glanced at him. "Perhaps, if you described his actions just before his collapse…?"

Geordi winced. The pain of that day was still so fresh…

"He wasn't doing anything special," Geordi said quietly. "He'd just come off bridge duty, so I asked him to join me in Engineering to lend a hand with some routine sensor diagnostics. I figured, with his help, I could let some of my double-shifters off for an early night. He agreed, I let my guys leave, and the two of us started working. A scan like that doesn’t take much brain power, so Data started prodding me to critique this short story he’d written. I…I didn’t want to admit I hadn't actually read the thing, and was trying to hedge my way around his questions, when he suddenly stepped back from the console. I asked him if he was OK. He said his vision was impaired, then he gasped and brought his hands to his temples. He stumbled a few steps, then fell to his knees and…and…he actually vomited. It wasn't…I mean, he hadn't eaten. It was just some yellowish digestive liquid. But still, I hadn't even known Data could vomit. For this one, awful moment, he looked at least as shocked as I felt. Then he said, 'I am so sorry, Geordi,' and blacked out. Just like that. He…he hasn't woken up since."

Geordi released a slow, shaky breath and blinked hard to hold back the tears the memory had brought to his eyes.

Danny knit his brows.

"Was there nothing to precipitate these symptoms?" he asked. "Nothing unusual – a flickering light, a change in atmospheric pressure…an alien scan perhaps?"
Geordi shook his head.

"No, we thought of that when Data first collapsed. But, there's been nothing unusual on board since we met up with that weird D'Arsey archive more than a week ago. Once the captain shut it down, everything went back to normal. Data was just fine."

Danny looked thoughtful.

"It is possible the virus had been lying dormant in his systems for some time," he said. "For months, perhaps, or even years. Mr. Barclay's analysis of the virus program should be able to give us some clues as to its origin which should, in turn, indicate the source and approximate time of infection. We can then investigate possible triggers."

"Years…" Geordi's expression tightened. "Oh my God…"

Danny regarded him curiously.

"Geordi? Is something wrong?"

"What if… Could he have been that vindictive…?"

"Who?" Danny asked. "What are you talking about, Geordi?"

"Lore," Geordi said, his voice flat and cold.

Danny blinked in alarm.

"Lore? You mean, my brother has a counterpart here as well?" He grimaced, horrified by the implications. "Please, please, Geordi, tell me Lore is not an android too."

"Data's very own evil twin." Geordi scowled. "You mean he's a psycho nut in your universe as well?"

"'Psycho nut' may not be the most accurate term," Danny said. "Loren is not psychotic. In fact, he has a very firm, if highly pessimistic, grasp of reality. My half-brother is a diagnosed sociopath. He is very charming, on the surface, and highly intelligent, but he has no…no sense of empathy. No conscience. However much he may pretend, deep down he cares for no one's welfare but his own."

"Yeah, that sounds like Lore, all right," Geordi scoffed. "You said he's your half-brother. Let me guess: same father?"

Danny nodded.

"My father was fifty-three years old when he and my mother first met," he said. "I was born five years after that. But, before we knew him, my father lived a different life – a life he often said he was not very proud of. In that life, he conceived a child with a fellow postgraduate student, Irene Graves. When she refused to marry him, my father attempted to raise the child on his own but he soon realized that, like Graves, he was incapable of putting the child's needs before his. He brought the boy to a foster care agency on Galor IV and, although he promised to return, he never went back."

"By the time Lore finally tracked my father to Terlina III, I was eight and Lore was thirty-seven, with a lifetime of manipulation and cruelty already behind him. Our father had never spoken of him, so his existence came as quite a shock to me, and to my mother. But…but before we came to learn just what he was, I have to admit…having a 'real' brother was wonderful."
"Lore was curious about me. He paid attention to me, taught me games he'd learned at the
orphanage, listened when I talked – not just about cybernetics and music theory, but about things I
was interested in, like biology, physics, astronomy, and history. Lore introduced me to comedy and
popular fiction and, for a while...a long while...I honestly adored him. But, slowly, the true intent of
his visit rose to the surface and the ultimate outcome of this...reunion...was Lore's incarceration in a
Federation rehabilitation colony for the attempted murder of my father, my mother, and myself. He
may well have succeeded, had he not disregarded Archie. His callous attitude toward my android
brother was, ironically, his downfall, and our salvation."

Danny's eyes went distant and a little sad, a look Geordi had often seen on Data's face when the
subject of Lore came up. Then, Danny sighed.

"My father told us, many times, that my mother and I were his second chance to get things right. But,
he didn't. He ignored us – perhaps not to the same extent that he had ignored Lore, but he did only
seek out our company when it suited him to do so. My father shared many of Loren's negative traits.
He was selfish, stubborn, manipulative, emotionally distant, and unsympathetic to anything other
than his own pleasure or discomfort. And before Lore...left..."

Danny swallowed and stared at his feet.

"He told me I was just the same. That I, too, lack empathy and emotional depth. I was just too
isolated from society to realize how...empty...I really was. I have spent my life striving to prove him
wrong. But sometimes, I...I can't help but wonder if, maybe..."

He shivered slightly, then offered Geordi a small smile.

"But, why are we talking about Loren?" he said. "Do you believe your Data's Lore may have
infected him with this piggyback virus?"

Geordi frowned, still a little overwhelmed by Danny's story, and the insidious psychological trauma
Lore had caused his friend in both universes. But he said, "I don't know. It's possible. Lore did
kidnap Data once, about a year ago. Bastard tried to manipulate him into leaving Starfleet and joining
his damned Cause – trumpeting the supposed 'superiority' of 'fully artificial life forms.' Data managed
to break free of Lore's brainwashing and stop him before...before things went too far. But... How
could a computer virus manifest in Data's systems as a physical illness? And why lie dormant for so
long before activating? I mean, what's the point?"

Danny shrugged, and he glanced up at the floating brain.

"Your Data's design mirrors ours in much more than just shape," he said. "There are many ways in
which we are more alike than unlike. Perhaps-"

He would have said more, but the console let out a soft bleep, the model brain's rapid blinking
slowed, and the results of the diagnostic showed up on the screen.

Danny grinned.

"Diagnostics report all clear," he said. "Looks like the self-correcting mechanism has done its job.
Pre-virus back-ups of all corrupted systems have restored full functionality, and there appears to be
no trace left of the piggyback virus. We can initialize the reboot whenever you're ready, Geordi."

"Then, let's go for it," he said, striding to Data's side. "You all set there, Reg?"

"Hm?"
The engineer looked up from his analysis and realized what was going on.

"Oh – you're going to…already…?"

He hurriedly placed the isolinear chip he'd been studying on the computer console and joined Geordi and Danny by the biobed – turning away before his eyes could catch a brief, lightening-like flash that passed between the chip and the sophisticated computer station.

Picking up a thin, probe-like tool, Geordi gently turned Data's head to the side and brought the instrument to the exposed circuitry at the back of Data's skull.

"Initializing activating units," he reported as he released a focused charge. There was a brief flash of static, and the little lights in Data's head lit up and began to blink red, yellow, and green.

The three men cheered in delight, and Geordi brought a hand to Data's back, right near his spine.

"Come on, Data," he muttered, "come back..."

His fingers found the android's power switch and Data lurched into a sitting position, blinking his golden eyes in disorientation as his conscious awareness caught up with his diagnostic records and the readings from his internal chronometer.

"Data!" Geordi exclaimed, practically jumping for joy. "Data, you're back! You're alive!"

Data blinked again, tilted his head, then cast his eyes around the dim room, acknowledging Barclay's delighted grin with a slight, confused nod.

"Geordi. What has happened? Why am I in...what I assume to be the holodeck...?" He glanced down at himself and gave a slight start. "...wearing full dress uniform?"

Geordi couldn't seem to stop beaming.

"It's a long story, Data, but..."

He grabbed the android's shoulders and pulled him into a fierce, brotherly hug.

"I really thought I'd lost you there, buddy," he said, trying not to snuffle on Data's dress uniform as his eyes filled with tears. "Don't ever scare me like that again, OK? You promise?"

"I cannot promise if I do not know what I did to scare you," Data pointed out.

Geordi pulled away and took off his VISOR so he could wipe his face on his sleeve.

"You were declared dead, Data," he said, once he could trust himself to speak again. "We had a memorial service and everything. Lots of balloons, music - you would have loved it."

Data seemed disquieted.

"Dead? But, how can that be? The last thing I remember before waking up here was assisting you with the sensor diagnostics in Main Engineering."

"That's the thing, Data, we don't really know," Geordi said. "It seems you were infected by some sort of malevolent virus. It caused a systems failure. But, fortunately, we've got a friend here who showed up just in time to save your butt. Now, where'd he..."

He glanced around the room, searching for Danny's heat signature.
"Where'd he go?"

"I...I didn't hear the doors..." Barclay said, turning in almost a full circle.

Data wrinkled his brow.

"Where did who go, Geordi?"

"Me."

Data turned just in time to see Danny step out from behind the all black, floor-to-ceiling box that contained the holographic bathroom. He moved slowly, a slight, awkward smile on his face and Spot cradled securely in his arms.

Data stared, as if unable to reconcile the visual information his optical sensors were processing with his current understanding of reality.

"You are not a hologram," the android observed.

"No," Danny acknowledged, scratching Spot behind the ears. "I am Lt. Commander Dr. Daniel Soong. Back home, I am called Data. But you may call me Danny if you wish. I am...your quantum duplicate."

Data's eyebrows rose so high they almost collided with his hairline.

"Hm!"

Danny nodded his sympathy.

"I understand your reaction. By all rights, I should not be able to exist here. But, all multiphasic, omniversal incongruities aside, I am pleased to finally meet you." He smiled. "Brother."

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Chapter Ten

It was getting close to the time the captain had scheduled to meet with his senior staff. Before breaking up to get ready in their respective quarters, Geordi had urged Data not to contact Picard or the other senior officers with news of his recovery, saying he wanted to see their faces when Data walked in the room, alive and well. Data had seemed a little uncomfortable with the prospect of making that sort of grand surprise entrance, but Geordi had been so enthusiastic, the android had reluctantly agreed.

Once Geordi left, Barclay excused himself as well, but not before giving Spot a lingering hug good-bye.

"I-I must admit, sir… I am going to miss the little furball," he said to Data, meeting the cat's wide-eyed stare with an affectionate gaze as he handed the sleek feline back to her rightful caretaker. "Will… Will you still be wanting me to…to, uh, cat-sit…now that you're…?"

"Of course," Data said. "You are one of the few people aboard for whom Spot has shown genuine affection."

He rubbed his cat behind the ears. Spot closed her eyes and purred with satisfaction.

Barclay beamed his quick, shy smile, thanked him, and strode from the holodeck, leaving Data and Danny alone for the first time. Faced with his counterpart's calm, golden stare, Danny felt as awkward and uncomfortable as a pimple on a prom queen's nose.

"So," he said.

"So," Data parroted.

"I, uh… I suppose you will be wanting to change your uniform."

Data glanced down at his dress uniform and nodded.

"Indeed, you are quite correct."

Danny swung his arms, then clasped his hands behind his back.

"May I accompany you?" he asked.

Data regarded him, his head slightly tilted.

"To your quarters," Danny elaborated. "I… If you don't want me tagging along I understand, but I am curious to see where you live."

Data nodded once.

"Certainly," he said politely and gestured to the exit with the arm that wasn't cradling Spot. "After you."
Danny saved the diagnostic program and followed the android out, failing to notice, as he did, that the holodeck grid seemed to wriggle and waver behind him...

"Erm...Data?" Danny said awkwardly, his eyes roving over the android's possessions while Spot curled up on the edge of a pull-out couch and Data changed in the adjoining room. He knew it was irrational and extremely selfish, given where he was, but he really resented having to address this man with a name that had always been uniquely his. "May I make a personal inquiry?"

"Please do," the android said.

"What are you doing up here on Deck Two?" he asked. "Crew quarters on this deck are cramped – tiny! Most have shared personal facilities. And none have viewports. As Second Officer, are you not entitled to better accommodations?"

"'Better' is a subjective term," Data called back. "These quarters are sufficient for my needs."

"Sufficient?" Danny made a face. "Data, we're out here in deep space, exploring places most beings can only imagine. Don't you want to see the stars?"

Data stepped out in his regular duty uniform, looking so much like a moonlit mirror it gave Danny a visible chill. Data didn't seem to notice.

"I am an android," the android stated, as if his guest didn't know. "As such, I do not suffer from claustrophobia, cabin fever, or any similar complaints that occasionally afflict organic beings over the course of a long mission."

"That may be so," Danny said, "but being an android does not change the fact that your rank and position entitles you to more personal space and a private viewport. Why deny yourself these advantages, especially on a beautiful ship like this?"

Data cocked his head, his brow furrowed.

"Deny myself… Hmm. I had not considered it in those terms."

"In what terms had you considered it?"

"In terms of my previous assignment, aboard the Trieste," the android said. "I had assigned quarters aboard that ship, but as I only rarely went off duty, I only made use of them when had I to wash myself and change my clothing. I had no need to sleep, no friends to pay me a visit, no pets to house and care for, and no personal items to store. Assuming my experience aboard the Enterprise would be similar, I initially made the argument that assigning me any quarters at all would be superfluous, but regulations require each registered crewmember be assigned a berth. I then requested shared quarters, believing I would only rarely make use of the space, but my rank entitled me to private quarters, so I chose to accept the smallest private room available. At first, the decision seemed logical. In fact, for the first few months, I had no furnishings but a private computer console I spent my off-hours improving. Since that time, though, the relationships I have developed with my crewmates have encouraged me to 'branch out,' if you will – to begin accruing possessions that reflect my individual tastes and recall significant experiences I have had, and to make creative use of my accumulated personal, recreational, time. And, it is only since I discovered my dream program last year that I began taking time off to sleep."

Danny's eyes sharpened with interest.
"You sleep? As in, you actually become unconscious and pass through the stages of sleeping and dreaming, as a human would?"

"Not exactly," Data admitted. "But I can shut down my cognitive functions for brief periods, during which time what I have termed my 'unconscious' provides me with vision-like scenarios I call 'dreams.' I have even suffered nightmares, the content of which were directly related to threats I could not perceive with my conscious mind."

Danny nodded, his brain practically buzzing with postcard-perfect snapshots from his childhood: conversations with his father, overheard mutterings, snatches of scribbled code he'd glimpsed in his father's old-fashioned paper notebooks. Sketched outlines for a radical, revolutionary program his father had never completed, yet seemed to operate with startling success in the constructed brain of the man before him.

"Intriguing," he breathed.

"The dream program was apparently included as part of my base programming," Data told him. "I believe my father intended to activate it once I had reached a certain level of cognitive development. It is unfortunate that circumstances denied him the opportunity to observe my cognitive growth first-hand. There remains much that I do not know about my father's designs."

He regarded Danny with his calm, golden eyes.

"You saved my life," he said. "And, for that, I am enormously grateful. It is clear you have considerable expertise in cybernetics, as well as a great deal of specific knowledge regarding the design and programming of Soong-type androids."

"That is true, up to a point," Danny said. "My knowledge is mostly second-hand, based on memories drawn from early childhood. I abandoned cybernetics when I left home as a teenager."

Data raised his eyebrows.

"If that is the case, your memory retention must be truly impressive."

"For a human, you mean?" Danny said wryly. "I suppose it is. I have what I call a semi-photographic memory. I can recall almost everything I've ever experienced, but the information I want doesn't always show up when I need it, even if I can feel it's there. I suppose you have perfect recall."

"I do."

Danny nodded, struggling to swallow back a spike of jealously.

"So, let me guess," he said. "You're gearing up to ask me if I know whether your father hid any more surprises in your base programming. If you are, my answer will have to be: no. I have no idea. Not without further study, at least."

"That was to be my question," the android admitted, but his expression remained intensely curious. "You said you left home as a teenager," he said. "Can I assume your father also objected to your decision to join Starfleet?"

Data chuffed a slight, bitter laugh.

"'Object'? he said. "'Object' is an understatement. When my father found out I'd joined the Fleet, he dropped all contact with me for almost a decade. It was as if, to him, I did not exist."
"Then you did not have a positive relationship with your father?"

"I didn't have any relationship with my father," Danny said. "At least, not until I got engaged. I think it was only then that my father began to understand that I really was my own person, with my own life and my own ambitions. I was never going to turn tail, revoke my dreams of exploration and discovery, and return home to become the cyberneticist he wanted me to be. I was not going to dedicate my life to vindicating his name or even to carrying on his work in artificial consciousness. And, if he did not accept me for who and what I was, he was going to lose out on any opportunity to know his grandchildren. In the end, it was he who swallowed his pride, accepted my advances toward reconciliation, and allowed our family to finally knit together as a close and caring unit. We could not repair our damaged past, but we found we could move on from it. From the time my daughter was born to the time of his death, I can honestly say my father and I had become friends."

"You have a daughter?" Data said, his expression oddly tight.

Danny nodded, turning his smooth ring around and around on his finger.

"Yes. And I miss her and my wife terribly. I can only hope the apparent time difference between our realities works to their advantage and, from their perspective, our time apart is short. It distresses me to think of them worrying about me...not knowing where I am...afraid I may never come home..."

Data seemed hesitant, his mouth hanging open for a moment before he said, "May I inquire..."

"Tasha," Danny told him. "My wife's name is Tasha. We call our daughter Lal – short for Lalena."

He smiled - a warm, fleeting grin. "My sweet little Lally-Pop. She's nearly two years old now. Commander Riker often says she's the most precocious child you'd ever care to meet, and as smart as a whole shipment of whips. I am not entirely sure what that means, but I do know he intends it as a compliment."

Data averted his eyes and seemed to swallow, hard.

Danny regarded him curiously.

"I am sorry if this disturbs you. I was told that, in this universe, Tasha Yar was kil—"

"You were told correctly," Data cut him off, then fixed him with his golden stare. "In the holodeck, Geordi said that, so far, no significant progress has been made in determining how or why you arrived here."

"True enough."

"Then, perhaps, we could assist each other."

"What do you have in mind?" Danny asked.

"Approximately three years ago, I learned my father had created a very special program for me," Data said. "A program that would allow me to experience emotions. The data chip it was on was, unfortunately, stolen before my father had a chance to install it and was later damaged during its recovery. As a result, the emotional program no longer functions. I was hoping that, perhaps, with your expertise, you might be able to repair the chip and recover the data it contains. My own efforts have, so far, proved unsuccessful."

Danny looked startled, and deeply confused.

"I don't understand."
"What do you mean?" Data asked curiously.

"I mean, what you just said doesn't make any sense," Danny told him. "In fact, it defies everything I know about the design and construction of a stable positronic matrix. Show me that chip."

Data regarded him for a moment longer, then strode to a shelf and lifted a small, square box from among the neatly arranged objects there. He handed the box to Danny, who opened it and peered down at the badly singed, sequin-sized disk with a frown.

"Perhaps you might explain…?" Data prompted.

"Yeah, I'll explain," Danny said, still frowning at the chip. "The ability to experience and express emotions cannot be stored as an external program you can just install or uninstall whenever you want. The self-adaptive, evolutionary positronic pathways you possess simply couldn't handle that kind of strain. In order to avoid fatal instability, the adaptive, heuristic algorithms required for emotional awareness must be fully integrated into the positronic matrix from the very start of construction! If they are not, the sudden installation of a program designed to recognize and process such complex, chaotic, and contradictory stimuli would instigate the unchecked development of new neural pathway links – pathways that would be inherently unstable. This instability would lead to system anomalies, even cascade failure! Therefore, whatever this thing is, it cannot contain the type of emotional program you described. It must be something else."

Data frowned.

"But the chip does function in that capacity," he said. "That is how my father described it to me, and how my late brother, who had stolen the chip, used it as a tool to manipulate me."

Danny blinked.

"Your late brother? Then, the Lore of this universe is...dead?"

"He is no longer functional," Data confirmed, his eyes not quite meeting Danny's.

Danny knit his brow.

"Curious," he said. "I feel oddly disappointed. Even...sad." He chuffed a slightly incredulous sigh through his nose. "I had not expected to feel this way."

"What did you expect to feel?" Data asked curiously.

"Nothing," Danny said. "Relief, perhaps. In my universe, Lore betrayed my parents, and me. He broke our trust and, ultimately, tried to kill us all."

"Lore also tried to kill me," Data said without expression, although his voice was heavy. "More than once. That is how he was...disabled. He attempted to distract me, then drew a phaser. I fired first."

Danny nodded slowly.

"I am sorry," he said sincerely.

Data didn't respond, but his perfect posture seemed slightly wilted.

Danny glanced back at the scarred chip in his hand, unable to avoid imagining the scenario that must have led to its recovery. The android Data, forced to shoot his brother... Retrieving the chip from Lore's damaged body...
He shuddered at the gruesome image and snapped the box closed.

"Still," he said, returning to their previous topic. "Whatever you were told about this chip, Data, something else must have been going on. I'm telling you, this thing cannot—"

"Riker to all senior staff," the first officer's voice cut in. "Please report to the Observation Lounge."

"I guess that means us," Danny said, and heaved a frustrated sigh. "Look, Data, can I keep this for a while?"

"Please do," Data said, and led the way out of his quarters and into the corridor. "That chip is, essentially, the only thing my father ever gave me. Even if I never install it, it is very important to me to know the true purpose and function of the program it contains."

"I understand," Danny said, and slipped the box into his pocket, his mind whirring with questions.

There was something seriously off about this chip. Its existence – its very necessity – seemed to contradict everything Danny knew of his father's true ambitions, as well as his own recent interactions with Data. The android he had been conversing with for the past hour was not a passionless automaton. He formed attachments, professed likes and dislikes, and had clearly exhibited both curiosity and discomfort in direct relation to topical stimuli. And yet, the android seemed convinced that he required this odd, external chip in order to experience emotions.

It was puzzling.

And, what of Lore? Had the two androids been fighting over the chip? Had Lore stolen it because he too believed that he lacked emotions?

In Danny's universe, Dr. Soong's life's goal had been to duplicate human consciousness in a mechanical construct. Even acknowledging the variables inherent to a parallel reality, Danny could not accept that Data's creator would have designed and programmed these intelligent, rational beings without the capacity for emotional experience. It just wouldn't make sense.

Unless...

More research was required: an in-depth analysis Danny felt it would be best to perform on his own. Because, if his suspicion was right...

If his suspicion was right, this half-melted chip might hold the key, not only to resolving the puzzling contradiction Data had presented, but – more significantly – to restoring Data's daughter to life.

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References include TNG: Genesis, Birthright I, Phantasms, Descent, Brothers, Datalore, Skin of Evil, Tin Man, The Quality of Life, and The Offspring.
Chapter Eleven

The senior officers' heartfelt reactions when they saw Data walk into the Observation Lounge with Danny was something Troi wished she could bottle and share - particularly the emotions she sensed from the captain. Troi had felt the captain's attitude toward his endlessly inquisitive second officer deepen and evolve over the years from tolerant mentor to trusted comrade, and Picard's flash of joy at seeing his dear friend up and about and apparently back to normal was as intense as it was characteristically understated.

"Data," he said, grasping the android's arms once Deanna, Beverly, Riker and Geordi had each released the rather overwhelmed officer from a powerful hug. "It's good to have you back."

"It is good to be back, sir," Data said, emphasizing the sincerity of that statement by offering him as close to a grin as he could muster.

Picard nodded and stepped back, as if to include the rest of the officers in his greeting.

"We'll have to get you reinstated to active status right away," he said. "But, that shouldn't be too much trouble. Of course, this means Mr. Worf will have to step down from the Ops position and resume his previous duties as Security Chief. Unless there are any objections…?"

"None at all, sir," the Klingon was quick to assure him, causing the others to smile. Worf scowled them down.

"And you, Mr. Data?" the captain continued. "Are you certain you feel well enough to return to active duty after your ordeal?"

"I am, Captain," Data said. "Although, as I do not remember my illness, or the time I spent offline, for me, it is as if I had never been away."

The captain grinned warmly at him for another long moment, then strode to his chair at the head of the table. The rest of the senior staff joined him, each taking their accustomed seat. Danny, who had been standing by the window, distractedly waving off the praise and gratitude from Data's friends, took a place at the far end, where he sat stiffly, apparently absorbed in thought.

Troi cast him a curious look, but he didn't look up, or even seem to notice.

"As I am sure Mr. Data has already reviewed our Mission Logs," Picard said with a glance at Data, who nodded in the affirmative, "I think we can just get started. Number One?"

"The last of the scientists are due to beam aboard by 1100 this morning, sir," Riker said. "It seems the remaining team decided to hold an impromptu last-minute ceremony where their research station had been. They wanted to bury a time capsule with items representing the ten years they'd spent living and working there. Once they're aboard, we will be free to set a course for the Daystrom Institute at your order."

Picard nodded, and turned his gaze to Danny.
"Very well. Has there been any progress regarding our other guest?" he asked.

La Forge looked down at his folded hands and sighed.

"I'm afraid not, Captain," he said. "We scanned the entire area of space we passed through at the
time Danny appeared aboard - picked through it with a fine tooth comb - and came up empty.
Likewise with the transporter. There was no record of his arrival – none at all. For all we can tell, it's
as if he literally materialized here out of nothing."

"I see," Picard said, and frowned. "Are we certain every possible avenue of inquiry has been explored?"

There was another moment of uncomfortable silence as all eyes turned to Danny, who had been so
passionately vocal at the last meeting. Danny, for his part, stared deeply into middle-distance, looking
as if he'd been frozen in time.


Danny didn't move.

"Mr. Data," Picard said dryly, "perhaps you might indicate to the commander that, as we are
discussing him, his attention would be appreciated?"

Data nodded and awkwardly tapped his motionless counterpart on the shoulder.

Danny came to with a deep gasp and blinked around the table, as if surprised to find himself there.

"I apologize," he said, flushing dark red. "I was thinking."

"Did you happen think up any new ideas that might help us pin down a way to get you home?"
Geordi asked.

"Hm?" Danny glanced at him. "What? Oh, no. No. I was thinking about something else. Captain,
may I be excused, please?"

"Well, I'd rather you explained first just what you—"

But Danny didn't seem to be listening.

"Yes, I will. Thank you, Captain," he said absently, and strode from the room.

The other officers stared after him with expressions ranging from confusion to irritation.

"What the hell was that?" Riker demanded.

"Mr. Data," Picard said, "go, keep an eye on him. I know he's been having some difficulty coping
with his situation. If this behavior is a sign of impending instability, I want to know about it."

"Aye, sir," the android acknowledged, and trailed his counterpart out the door.

The captain turned to Troi.

"Counselor?" he said.

"If you're asking me if he's spiraling into a panic attack, I have to say I don't think he is," the empath
said. "I didn't sense any fear or worry from him. If anything I'd say he was…curious. Intensely,
almost desperately curious."

"Curious about what?" Riker asked.

Troi shook her head.

"I'm afraid I couldn't say," she admitted. "I've never encountered a mind quite like his before. He operates in a haze of persistent surface anxiety. It acts as a sort of dampener, making him quite difficult to read. That's not to say he hides his emotions – quite the opposite, in fact. It's just...he seems to have a habit of rationalizing and intellectualizing his feelings rather than feeling them, if you know what I mean."

Picard frowned.

"Do you think he might be a danger to himself, or to this ship?"

Troi considered that carefully.

"No," she said at last. "No, he wouldn't try to harm himself, or us. But, he is a slightly obsessive personality. He's been craving focus since he arrived here and, I believe, he thinks he's finally found it."

"Well," Picard sighed, "hopefully whatever it is that has so thoroughly grabbed the commander's attention will keep him safely occupied until we can better work out what can be done for him. In the meantime, if you truly believe there is nothing more we can learn here, I will have the helm prepare to set course for the Daystrom Annex on Galor IV. Number One, I—"

The overhead lights flickered and faded, then burst back to full power. The far doors slid open, then closed. Then, the ship gave a violent lurch, nearly tossing the officers from their seats.

At a glance from the captain, the officers were on their feet and headed for their duty stations: Picard, Riker, Troi and Worf to the bridge; Geordi and Dr. Crusher hustling into the turbolift on their way to Engineering and Sickbay, respectively.

As Picard strode down the ramp from the upper horseshoe to the lower bridge, he barked, "Report! What happened? Did we hit something?"

"Negative, Captain," Worf reported, jabbing at his curved console. "There is no sign of a collision. Sensors report nothing in our vicinity but the planet itself."

"Then, what made the ship—"

The floor rocked beneath their feet, and the lights faded to a dull orange glow. The console displays flickered, then began to pulse in rhythm, accompanied by a low, ominous hum.

"Should we evacuate the bridge, sir?" Riker asked.

"Not just yet," Picard said, striding to the young lieutenant sitting at the ops position. "Could this be related to the work of the research scientists?" he asked her. "Could something in the upper atmosphere be causing this turbulence?"

The lieutenant danced her hands over the flickering controls, only to report, "No, sir."

The strange, mechanical hum was growing louder, the flickering pulses more intense. Picard pursed his lips, clenched his fists, then spun to face Worf.
"Lieutenant," he said, "have you any idea what might be behind this-"

The floor seemed to drop out from under them. Picard gasped despite himself, swallowing back the nauseating sensation in his gut. Before he could reclaim enough breath to bark an order, a bright electronic shimmer seemed to melt out of the walls, the ceiling, the computer stations. The shimmer swirled, slowly at first, then faster and faster, gathering itself like a whirlwind into a single spot between the ops station and the captain's chair. As the bridge crew watched warily, the spinning form seemed to draw itself up, growing taller, denser, more substantial, until, finally, it had coalesced into a rather ghostly, vaguely humanoid shape.

"Captain!" Troi exclaimed, her hands to her temples. "I feel...the presence here is very strong. Immensely powerful."

"Could it be a member of the Q Continuum?" Riker asked.

"No... This is...something else. It's not a Q, but it doesn't feel like an organic mind... I...I can't quite explain..."

The shimmering shape seemed to move, its barely-defined head rolling from side to side.

Worf drew his phaser, but Picard signaled him to keep back.

"Wait," he said. "I think... I think, whatever it is...that it's trying to communicate."

A man's high-pitched laughter echoed around and through them, seeming to come from everywhere at once. The bridge officers cringed and covered their ears against the assault.

"What is this?" Picard demanded, shouting to be heard over the incredible noise. "Who are you?"

The laughter centered in on the shimmering shape and, in a flash that buzzed and crackled across Picard's skin like a static shock, the bridge lights and consoles were back to normal.

The captain blinked the spots from his eyes and glared up at the being in front of him.

The man was lanky and slender, perhaps seven feet tall, with the fire-green eyes and alabaster complexion of a natural red-head. Only, instead of hair, fine red feathers grew from the top of his head - something that was only evident quite close up, since the feathers were as fluffy and soft-looking as eiderdown. The shape of his face was more saurian than simian with a wide mouth and overlarge eyes, and his teeth, when he smiled, were disturbingly sharp. He wore a simple, but expertly tailored, tunic and trousers of forest green suede and, when he turned, Picard realized what he had taken to be the bottom half of a red cloak was really a rather impressive feathered tail.

"Who am I?" the man repeated, his clipped, nasal voice laced with amusement. "Why, Captain, I'm disappointed. Don't you people recognize a Constructor when you see one?"

Picard frowned.

"A 'Constructor'?"

"Alas, how soon mortal memory fades," the man sighed. "Of course a Constructor! I am of the Aesir. We once held this quadrant united, ruling from our capital in, what you now call, the D'Arsay system, though it was not called that then. No, not by a long shot."

Riker stepped forward.
"The D'Arsay system? But what are you doing here?"

"You honestly don't know me, do you," the man said, peering first Riker's face, then Picard's with an odd, hawk-like intensity. "I suppose immortality really doesn't last forever. But, if you don't know me, then that means you are also ignorant of the incredible honor for which you have been chosen - an honor it is now my privilege to reveal to you! For, I am the Messenger of my people - the One Who Crosses Boundaries. I am the son of a giant, the brother of gods, the father and mother of monsters. I'll admit an aversion to torture, but harbor no fear of dying, for my daughter is Death herself. Fox, Trickster, and Deceiver are just three of my multitudinous titles, but you, Captain," he said, and winked at Picard, "may call me Ihat."

"Ihat!?" Picard's expression clenched in surprise. "But...how...?"

"Oh, so you know me now, Captain? Or, should I say, Korgano?" the being said slyly, sidling in close. "And so you should. Or don't you remember that fateful day you put the dread Masaka to bed and allowed me the chance to live again?"

Picard frowned.

"No. Surely, you can't be..."

The tall man smiled a smile that, for some reason, reminded the captain of Lore.

"Ah, I see it now!" he said, his brilliant tail flaring out behind him. "You believed that I was dead! Dead again, that is! But no, I was too quick, too clever, to be caught in Masaka's trap. Since our last meeting, Captain, I have made a study of your culture and your ship, and I come to you now with great news. You, all of you, shall have the privilege to serve as the physical templates I require to reconstruct and resurrect my people. Now," he said, and rubbed his pale hands together, "who wants to be first?"

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

Chapter Twelve

Upon leaving the Observation Lounge, Data found he had just enough time to catch the turbolift before the doors closed on Danny. He dashed through the doors at near-record speed but, if the man was aware of the android's last-second intrusion, he gave little sign. He seemed restless, bobbing up and down on the balls of his feet and muttering softly.

Curious, Data upped the gain of his audio receptors, and realized Danny wasn't muttering at all. He was singing to himself: a strange, fast-paced song the android didn't recognize.

"When I made a shadow on my window shade, they called the police and testified. But they're like the people chained up in the cave… In the allegory of the people in the cave by the Greek guy…"

Data furrowed his brow, thoroughly intrigued by his counterpart's behavior.

"Commander Soong?"

The man jumped, startled.

"What-huh? Oh, it's you," he said, his eyes sliding down to the floor as he twisted his hands nervously in front of him. "Yeah. Guess the captain sent you to keep an eye on me. I don't blame him. I really haven't been acting like myself since I've been here. Well…not the self I am at home, anyway. Not the self I know I can be. And it's just getting worse, isn't it. I should be embarrassed, but really I'm just…very, very scared. I hate uncertainty. Really. Never been a fan."

"Commander Soong," Data tried again.

"They all probably think I'm nuts in there," Danny babbled on, oblivious. "And I'm not sure they're wrong. Already had to see the counselor twice, and she wanted to meet with me again today…"

He took in a shaky sigh and leaned his arm against the turbolift wall.

"God, I don't feel well."

"Then we should go to Sickbay. Computer—"

"No! I'm not that kind of sick," Danny said, and sighed again, turning his red-rimmed eyes to the domed ceiling. "Computer," he said, "Deck 11, please."

The 'lift started moving with only the slightest lurch. Danny glanced in Data's direction and stretched his lips in a wry little smile.

"Well," he said, "since it looks like we won't be solving my problems any time soon, at least we might be able to take a crack at yours."

Data cocked his head.

"My problems?"
Danny's smile broadened.

"It's that chip you gave me," he said. "That so-called emotional program. It's given me an idea. A big one. In fact, I think it might be the lead I needed. Because, I know my father. That is, I...I did know him... And, you're standing there staring at me like some befuddled, yellow-eyed owl, so it's pretty clear I know his work, alternate reality or not. You'd agree with me there, right?"

"I am hardly in a position to disagree," Data said, regarding his rambling counterpart with some concern.

"Damn right," Danny said with a sharp nod. "And I'm glad you're here, Commander, because if I'm to move forward with this, I'm going to require information. About you, about your past and, especially, about Lore. I know how things were with me and Lore and Lore and my father, but not with you and your Lore and your Lore and your father. You told me about how you and Lore fought over that chip, how he stole it and you...you took it back. But why? Why'd he want the thing if it was designed for you?"

"There is much that I will never know about my brother," Data said, rather flatly. "He was a passionate individual, but cruel, with little pity or sympathy for anyone but himself."

"Then your Lore did feel emotions," Danny said, his blue eyes sharp and serious. "Integrated as part of his base programming and not installed from an external disk?"

"He did," Data confirmed.

"Ha!" Danny barked. "I knew it, I knew it! And, if he went wrong, it would just figure that..."

His words melted into a deep, wide yawn, and he pressed a hand to his forehead.

"Ooh..."

"If I may, Commander..." Data spoke, his brow deeply furrowed as he observed the man's sagging posture. "While I am willing to discuss my family history with you at length, and in as much detail as you might wish, I do not believe that you should continue with this line of inquiry right now. You are exhibiting signs of severe physical and mental exhaustion. Perhaps, if you returned to your quarters—"

"No, no, oh no, can't go there," Danny said, and released a slight, sad chuckle. "But you're right. I am exhausted. Can't sleep right, you see. Too many thoughts, too many worries, crowding around up on the roof for that." He gestured to his head, then grinned. "I think I can help your baby, buddy."

Data blinked, taken completely off guard.

"Lal...? You believe you could restore my daughter?"

"Didn't want to say it...get your hopes up..." Danny said, yawning into the crook of his elbow. "But you went and pulled it outta me. Still gotta check the diagnostic thingy in the, you know... holodeck...but it's dampeners...gotta be."

Danny ruffled his hair with both hands, as if to shake himself awake, then began to pace in short, quick steps as the 'lift slowed to a halt. The doors opened, and he paced out into the corridor, leaving Data to trail behind.

"It's the only thing that would make any sense, given that weird chip. Because I know my father. Or, did I say that already?"
"You did," Data said.

"Yeah. Because I did. And it's the only thing that makes any sense."

Danny stopped outside Holodeck Three, yawned hugely, shook his head, then blinked blearily at the control panel beside the door.

"That's not right," he said. "Seems my diagnostic program's already running in there. Didn't we turn it off before we left for the meeting?"

"Yes," Data said, stepping forward to check the readout. "The holodeck appears to be empty. Perhaps we should—"

The corridor shook, slamming Danny against the wall and causing Data to stagger a step back. The lights faded to dull yellow, then an alert signal began to flash.

"What the hell?" Danny said, rubbing his sore shoulder. "We couldn't have hit something. Any bad guys out this way?"

"None that I am aware of," Data said, his fingers dancing rapidly over the control panel. One flat buzz after another indicated his inability to disengage the program.

He frowned, then turned back to Danny.

"You should go to your quarters and sleep. I must return to the bridge. I will shut down the holodeck system from there."

"I thought you didn't tell jokes," Danny scoffed.

"Pardon me?"

"That thing you just said about heading to the bridge without me. Do you seriously think I could get any sleep without knowing what's going on?" Danny demanded.

Data opened his mouth.

"Before you reply," Danny said, raising a finger, "the correct answer is 'hell no.' I'm going with you."

"Your concentration is impaired by the effects of sleep deprivation," Data protested.

"Tell me something I don't know," Danny shot back, already striding back up the corridor. "Look, I can handle myself. If you're bothered, think of it this way: the sooner we find out what's happening the sooner we can fix it, and the sooner we fix it, the sooner I can get some rest. Real rest. Maybe I'll even crash with you, OK? So, let's go!"

For a fraction of a second, Data stood stock still, considering all possible contingencies that might arise if he stepped forward and forcibly escorted his counterpart to bed. Extensive experience with the irrational nature of human stubbornness ultimately led him to relent, however, and follow Danny back into the turbolift. After all, when it came to supervising the conduct of a brilliant, unpredictable wildcard, Data had learned it was usually better to keep the subject in sight than to leave them alone to their own devices.

Particularly when that wildcard was a Soong.

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"Ihat wait, stop," Picard said, striding forward to cut the being off before he could reach the nervous young ensign at the helm. "If you would just explain what you're after, perhaps we could work out a —"

"What is there to explain?" Ihat said, craning his neck to fix the captain with his raptor-like eyes. "I am here, Captain, because you summoned me. I have investigated your people and found you worthy. There is nothing more to discuss."

"Wait—" Picard spoke quickly. "You said, we summoned you?"

"Of course," Ihat said. "All has occurred according to design. You woke Masaka, then dispatched her, thus ending her reign and initiating a new phase of rebirth. Such is the Fate of the Gods, my dear Captain. An endless cycle of death and renewal. I serve as the harbinger of that Fate. I am the Flame that sparks the Final Conflict. Then, when all that came before has burnt to ashes and fallen dark, it is my role to return like the Phoenix, and light the path to the Great Return. For, I am Ihat: The Messenger! The One who crosses the Boundary set between the realms of Death and Life."

"Reincarnation…" Riker muttered. "I suppose it's a common enough theme in ancient, ceremonial cultures."

"Indeed, Number One," Picard said. "But, Ihat… Honored as we are that you've chosen us for this, I'm afraid there's been a serious misunderstanding. We did not summon you. We encountered your culture's archive by accident. It was never our intention to…awaken you."

"And yet, you did," Ihat said, his green eyes growing eerily cold. "And I cannot go back, Captain. Not now that I am here."

"Then, allow us to take you to Galor IV," Picard said. "Your archive is being studied there. I'm certain our scientists could—"

"I do not know this 'archive' or your 'scientists!'" Ihat snapped, his crimson tail fanning dramatically behind him. He stepped slowly forward, like a predator stalking its prey, his unsettling glare fixed squarely on Picard.

"There are no accidents, Captain. Would you defy the Will of the Gods?"

The rising tension was broken by the hiss of the turbolift doors. Ihat turned to stare up at the two newcomers, a broad smile slowly revealing his sharp, pointed teeth.

"Well," he said, clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "If it isn't my kindly host. Up and about, I see. I must say, it's nicer to view you from the outside, Commander Data. Though, it was quite the illuminating experience to wear your skin for a time."

Data looked utterly lost.

"Captain?" he inquired.

"This is…Ihat, Data," Picard said carefully. "One of the personalities—"

"From the D'Arsay archive," Data finished, his golden eyes wide with wonder.

"The D'Arsay archive?" Danny repeated through a frown. "You mean, the alien program that invaded your systems a couple of weeks back? But, how—?"

"That is what we are in the process of figuring out, Commander," Picard interrupted, keeping his
focus on the feathered intruder.

Data tilted his head.

"May I inquire as to the reason for your presence here," he asked the being.

Ihat narrowed his eyes.

"Then, you really don't know?"

"I do not," Data confirmed.

"You, of all people, are telling me that you have no idea why I have come?"

Data gave a very slight shake of his head.

"I am afraid I do not understand what you are asking of me."

"Hm," Ihat said, stalking up the ramp to stare into Data's startled eyes. "I can see that you don't. How curious. And, how strangely disappointing."

He fixed his gaze on Danny, who backed nervously against the engineering console.

"But you…" the tall being said, moving steadily closer. "I can see the glimmer of suspicion growing behind your eyes."

"Me?" Danny asked, groping at the console behind him, as if wishing he could pass right through it. "No, I'm as clueless as the rest of them. More, even. I don't belong here. I'm from…another place…"

"I am not a fool, little mortal," Ihat snapped, jutting his saurian features deep into Danny's personal space. "I can see it in your face. You must know me."

"I don't," Danny insisted. "But, I might have a suspicion as to what you are."

Keeping his eyes fixed on the alien's, Danny trusted to touch and his photographic memory to guide his fingers to the right keypad…

Ihat let out a sharp, bird-like cry and backed away, as if in pain. Danny's expression lit up and he quickly turned to face the console, swift fingers tapping in the rest of the command.

Ihat's green eyes blazed with unspoken fury. He crouched low and opened his wide mouth, but before he could spring, the feathered being splintered into a glittering cascade of fractured light.

The bridge crew made a peculiar sound, as if they'd all been holding their breath and only now remembered to let it out.

"Commander," Picard spoke. "Explain."

"It was just a guess, Captain," Danny said. "I would never have thought to act on it if he hadn't acted so suspicious. But, it occurred to me that if this Ihat character originated as an alien program, then what we were seeing might not be a biological entity at all, but a physical manifestation of an artificial consciousness. Perhaps, the very program that had infiltrated Commander Data's systems and caused them to fail."

"Wait – are you saying he was Data's computer virus?" Riker said.
"That would be my supposition, sir."

"And what did you do back there?" Riker demanded. "How did you shut him down?"

"Well," Danny said, with a glance to Data, "after I left the meeting, I went to Holodeck Three, where Commander Data and I found the diagnostic program I had designed was running, although no one appeared to be inside. It is my theory that the Ihat program infiltrated my holographic positronic brain model and, somehow, used its direct link to the main computer to manifest in the form we all observed. When I cut off power to the holodeck system, he…disappeared."

A small, half-incredulous smile hung loosely on Picard's features, and he shook his head.

"Well done, Mr. Data," he said.

Danny beamed.

"Thank you, sir."

Data blinked, but said nothing.

Picard headed back to his command chair, then turned to face the helm, starting to feel the tension drain from his shoulders.

"Ensign," he said, "set a course for the Daystrom Annex on Galor IV. The moment the remaining research scientists have beamed aboard, you are to engage at warp four."

"Aye, Captain," the navigator acknowledged.

"Commander Data, Commander Soong," Picard continued, "I want the pair of you to run a thorough scan of that diagnostic program, the holodeck systems, and the main computer. Call in anyone you need to assist. I want that D'Arjay virus contained and removed once and for all."

"Aye, sir," the duo chorused, then glanced at each other.

"Number One, you have the bridge. I'll be in my Ready Room—"

A wave of manic laughter crashed over the bridge crew like a physical force, knocking everyone who wasn't seated to the carpet. There was a moment of intense nausea, followed by an excruciating squeezing sensation, as if every bone and organ was being manhandled by a sadistic giant.

As suddenly as they had come, the awful sensations lifted, and the laughter faded as if it had never been. Picard groaned and sat up slowly, gingerly bringing a hand to his head—

Where his fingers met, not smooth scalp, but soft, swept-back hair. He ran his fingers along the unexpected strands, following them to what felt like…like a French braid, the thick, pepper-grey tail of which hung past his shoulders.

"What the…"

Thoroughly alarmed, Picard climbed to his feet and looked down finding, not his familiar shape, but the unmistakable proportions of a rather well-toned feminine torso.

"Merde…!"

All around him, the bridge crew were making similarly disconcerting discoveries, and exclamations. Picard looked to Riker, then to Troi, then up to Worf standing grimly at tactical with an expression of
such simmering outrage it was all the captain could do to swallow back a very inappropriate burst of laughter.

"Well…" Riker commented in a wry mezzo-soprano voice. He rubbed a slender hand over his smooth jawline and grimaced. "This is…different."

"I'll say," Troi grunted in a surprising baritone, looking her boxy new frame over with an appalled expression.

"Data!" Worf exclaimed, his new voice low and husky, but as feminine as Riker's.

"How is he?" Picard asked, jogging up the ramp to crouch beside his android friend.

"Unconscious, sir, but breathing," Worf reported before turning his attention to Danny. "As is Commander Soong."

"Strange," Picard commented. "They appear to be the only ones left unchanged." He tapped his combadge. "Picard to Sickbay."

Crusher's voice responded. She sounded startled, and a bit confused.

"Captain? Are you all right? You sound—"

"We can discuss that later, Doctor," Picard said impatiently. "Right now, we need a team up here for Data and Commander Soong."

"I'm on my way," Crusher said, and broke the connection.

Worf turned his almond-eyed glare to the captain.

"Ihat is responsible for this," he rumbled. "I will make him pay for this assault."

"I'm with you this time, Mr. Worf," Picard said grimly, rising to his feet without taking his eyes from the two unconscious men. "But I've a feeling this is just a tap on the shoulder. Ihat is playing with us, showing us what he can do, that he is here…in this ship…in our computer. We must track him down and contain him...before he has the chance to make this situation any worse."

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

References include: "No One Knows My Plan" by They Might Be Giants (Warner/Chappell Music, Inc., 1994) and TNG "The Offspring," "Datalore," "Silicon Avatar," and "Masks."

Creative writing is more fun when shared. Your comments are always welcome! :)
Chapter 14

Chapter Thirteen

Danny Soong strode down the Enterprise corridors, his eyes focused straight ahead. Somewhere in the distance he heard a strange, metallic clanging, but he ignored the urge to turn and investigate and just kept walking, walking, following a more powerful draw…

He walked as if on autopilot, his mind not really on where he was going or why. The metallic clanging faded behind him as he turned a corner, his gaze fixed on the blue of the carpet until a door slid open in front of him.

The smell struck him first: the clean, familiar scent of his wife's shampoo blended with the sweet smell of his baby's favorite mashed bananas.

His head snapped up, his eyes focused—

"Dada!"

Lal slammed into him, her little arms squeezing his leg with all the strength they could muster. Danny reached down and swept her high into the air, his heart soaring at the sound of her delighted squeals.

"Hello, baby!" he said, spinning her around before cradling her close to his chest, his joyful grin a match for hers. "How's my happy girl? Have you been very good for Mommy while your Dada was away?"

"Data?" Tasha called from the bedroom. "That you?"

"Of course," he said, shifting Lal's weight until the little girl was essentially sitting on his arm. Lalena tapped his nose with her finger – "Beep!" – and he kissed her hair and forehead, the two of them dissolving into silly giggles.

Tasha walked into the main living room of their quarters dressed in her loose lounging clothes and rubbing a towel over her short, wet hair. Danny took note of her lithe figure framed by the starscape behind her, and reflected that she was one of the most beautiful sights he'd ever seen.

"Well, you're certainly in a good mood," she said. "We'll see how long that lasts once you see what your daughter's been up to today."

"Why Lal," Danny said, leaning his forehead toward hers until their eyes crossed. "Have you been causing mischief?"

"Boo!" Lal replied, and held out both her hands. For the first time, he noticed they were slathered thickly with blotches of green, blue, and red paint – as was her dress. A glance down at his uniform revealed colorful hand-shaped smudges on his legs, chest, and arms. The paints themselves were on the coffee table, beside a well-smeared stack of construction paper.

"Ah," he said.

Tasha smirked at the messy pair and leaned in to peck her husband's cheek.
"Welcome home," she said wryly.

"Thank you," he replied. "Am I to understand Lal has been finger painting?"

"And how," Tasha said. "But not on any conventional surface. Oh no. Our little artist used our bedroom wall for her canvas…and she didn't stop there."

Danny cocked his head. "What do you mean?"

Tasha winced.

"I hate to show you, but…"

She walked to the cabinet where Danny stored his own artwork. Beside it stood an easel draped with a shiny blue cloth. She pulled the cloth away and stood to the side, allowing Danny to assess the damage for himself.

Danny blinked and lowered Lal to the floor.

"I worked three months on that painting," he said, staring at the swirling, bluish clouds of the nebulous vortex – the careful brushwork marred by at least half a dozen tiny, bright green handprints. "I never felt it was quite finished."

"Guess it's finished now," Tasha grumbled.

He looked at her.

"How…?"

"Did she manage to reach it?" Tasha finished for him. "Apparently, she knocked it off the easel. I found it on the floor, under the sofa, when I got home today. The sitter swore she just turned her back for a minute."

Danny nodded slowly, then looked down at his daughter. Lal looked back up at him with wide, dark eyes. A frown spread over his face and he crouched down to her level.

"Lal," he said seriously, "why did you damage Dada's painting?"

"Painting!" she exclaimed, as if that explained everything.

Danny nodded again, his expression thoughtful.

"I believe I understand," he said.

"Then maybe you could translate for me," Tasha said. "I just spent half the afternoon cleaning up this little vandal's mess, and you're not even mad!"

Danny stood and faced his irate wife.

"I do not believe this was a random or malicious act on her part," he said. "Consider where she chose to paint – our bedroom wall. My unfinished painting. I believe Lal was sending us a message. A message she is not yet capable of expressing in words."

Tasha raised an incredulous eyebrow.

"Oh?"
"Yes," Danny said. "It is something I too used to do, when I was about Lal's age. Not with paints, but with pens. When I was young, my father would often disappear into his lab for days, writing endless notes in his old-fashioned paper notebooks. I remember thinking that if I copied him and did what he did, he'd pay the same kind of attention to me. This backfired, of course. My father caught me scribbling over his careful notes and locked me in my room until supper. He didn't yell, he didn't scream. He didn't even look at me. He just picked me up and locked me away, out of his sight, without uttering a single word."

Tasha's expression softened and she squeezed Danny's hand. Danny shrugged, and turned back to Lal.

"You missed your Dada, didn't you," he said. "You did this to get my attention."

"Dada!" Lal said, and started to sniffle.

"Oh, baby," he said, and pulled her into his arms. "I am sorry I have not been here with you. I assure you, my absence was not by choice. There is no place in this or any other universe I would rather be than here with you and your mother."

"If that's how you feel," Tasha said, "then you can give Lal her bath tonight. I had a crazy day and I had to skip my workout to clean up all that blasted paint."

"Certainly," Danny said, noting the tension lines pinching his wife's forehead. He knew how much she hated to miss a workout. Tasha was impatient and restless by nature, and her physical training sessions were her preferred outlet for blowing off the extra steam that built up in her during the day. It was a need Danny understood, but did not share.

"If you wish to go to the gym now, I can take care of things here," he said. "Lal and I will have dinner prepared by the time you return, and you can tell us all about your day."

As he'd anticipated, a wave of relief swept over her face. Tasha smiled and pecked his lips.

"You are the best," she said, then squeezed his shoulder and dashed back to their bedroom to collect her workout gear. Danny watched her go and smiled down at Lal.

"Lal, did you know that your Mommy has the cutest little—"

"Data!" came Tasha's mock-scandalized voice.

"Walk!" Danny called back. "I was going to say walk!"

Tasha emerged with her gym bag slung over her shoulder and patted the side of his face.

"I'll see you in a few hours," she said and strode out the door, calling over her shoulder: "Try not to blow up the ship while I'm away!"

"We will do our best," Danny assured her, and took Lal by the hand.

"Now," he said, "I think it's time we got you cleaned up. I—"

A searing sensation lanced through his brain and he jolted into a sitting position.

"Data!"

He heard Geordi's voice in his ear and blinked his over-bright vision clear. He appeared to be in Sickbay, seated on a biobed with his legs stretched stiffly out in front of him. He tried to think back,
to remember how he'd gotten there, but encountered only an unsettling blankness. Everything felt strange – his senses seemed uncannily keen, yet oddly muffled, as if he were experiencing the world through a thick rubber mask.

"Geordi," he said, and turned his gaze to his friend. Something in the back of his mind informed him his eyes automatically adjusted their contrast and brightness levels to compensate for the Sickbay lighting. Another part of his mind seemed to be closely monitoring his balance, tracking the shifting motions of his spine and the various muscles required to keep him in a sitting position. Surely that wasn't normal…

"Data, thank God! Are you all right?" Geordi exclaimed after what seemed an enormous lag.

Danny cocked his head, his friend's question prompting a stream of data to scroll rapidly through his conscious mind. Information that seemed oddly reminiscent of a computer diagnostic program…

He glanced down at his hands. Pale, golden synthoskin gleamed back at him. He flexed his fingers, then swung his legs off the biobed and flexed his knees and ankles, the odd something in the back of his mind translating every move he made into neat lines of numerical data.

He blinked, experiencing a very mild, highly abstracted sense of trepidation as the reality of his situation became all too clear.

"Oh shit," he said.

It was the only comment that seemed appropriate.

******

Her patient's constant rocking and his panicked, repetitive humming noises were getting to be more than Dr. Crusher could stand.

"Commander," she said. "Commander, stop that. Commander Soong, just open your eyes and talk to me!"

The man shook his head, his hands pressed to his ears and his eyes squeezed tightly closed.

"I…I cannot," he gasped. "There is…so…so much… I cannot control…"

"Can't control what?" the doctor pressed. "Commander, tell me what's wrong."

"My thoughts," the man managed through his moans. "They…they come at me like fireworks. There are so many…so many sensations, sounds, snippets of music all playing at once. I see images…from the past, flashing so quickly…triggered by sounds, by smells… They are so clear… Yet, there is no order, no system…"

"Then concentrate on me," Dr. Crusher said. "Can you do that, Commander? Can you open your eyes and look at me?"

The man stopped rocking and cracked open a single blue eye, his breathing ragged with fear. The doctor smiled warmly and took his hand in hers.

"There," she said kindly. "Isn't that better? Now, you just focus on me. I want to ask you a few questions. Is that all right?"

"Yes," the man said, starting to straighten out from the hunched up ball he'd been. He swallowed
hard, then shivered.

"What is it?" Dr. Crusher asked. "Are you cold?"

"No," the man said. "It is...my...my insides, my skin, my muscles, my brain! I can feel them all, pulsing, stirring within me! A most...disconcerting...sensation. And...your hand. It is so warm. And my uniform. I...I can feel it against my skin. I was always aware of it before, but never...never like this. It is the same with the air here...whenever someone passes...I feel the breeze brush my face and it...it tickles. Yet, there is no accompanying data. No record of changing air temperature or minute shifts in barometric pressure, or—"

A small crease appeared over Dr. Crusher's nose.

"Commander," she said, "can you tell me your name?"

"My name?" the man said, and cocked his head. "But Doctor, surely you know me. I am Data."

Dr. Crusher squinted, peering closely into the man's guileless, befuddled eyes.

"You are Data, aren't you," she said in a near whisper. "Then, that would mean..."

She straightened and released the man's hand.

"Stay right there," she said, and dashed across the room to where Geordi was running a tricorder over Data's android frame.

"Geordi," she said, "Geordi, I need to talk with you."

"What is it?" the engineer asked, stepping away from his patient.

"It's that ihat creature," she said, sotto voce, her eyes shifting back and forth from the android on the biobed to his trembling human twin. "I think he switched them. Data and Danny, I mean."

Geordi's lips parted.

"Then that would mean..."

"Right," she confirmed, and a rather pensive expression crept over her face. "I'm afraid it looks like Data may finally have gotten his wish."

Geordi's forehead wrinkled.

"That certainly would explain Data's odd reactions. Or rather, Danny's, I suppose. But, if you're right, this is going to take some serious adjustment," he said. "For both of them."

"And they're not the only ones," Crusher said, turning her eyes to the row of biobeds that lined the far wall, where the rest of the transformed bridge crew were undergoing complete physicals. Riker seemed thoroughly bemused, perusing his readouts along with the nurse, but Troi and Worf were clearly infuriated by their new circumstances. As for Picard...

"Excuse me," Crusher said.

She left Geordi to go back to his scans and strode across the room to where her head nurse, Lt. Alyssa Ogawa, was just finishing up with Captain Picard.

"The captain is in perfect health, Doctor," the nurse reported, closing her tricorder. "In fact, they all
"Thank you, Alyssa," Crusher said. "I'd like you to see to Commander Soong, now. I'd like a complete workup on him, with particular attention to his thought and brain wave patterns."

"Yes, Doctor," Ogawa said, and marched off to carry out her orders.

Once she had gone, Crusher shot Picard a significant look. Picard read its meaning at once, and the set of his mouth indicated he was far from amused.

"Scoff all you like, Doctor," he said in his cultured, feminine voice. "But, no matter my current appearance, I am still the captain of this ship, and I will not be mocked, by you or anyone."

"What makes you think I'm mocking you?" she said. "I think you look quite handsome for a woman your age. I especially like the braid."

"Doctor..." the captain warned.

The quirk to the Doctor's lips spoke volumes her tongue would never say. Striding to the nearest medical tray, she selected a hypospray and programmed in her prescription.

"This is just a standard injection," she said, but Picard held up a hand.

"You couldn't be more specific, could you?"

"Hormones," she said. "You are a woman now, with a fully functioning female reproductive system. You must be aware that, without this injection, a woman experiences a monthly—"

"Doctor!" Picard exclaimed, his pale face flushing all the way to his ears.

"What?" she said, blinking innocently. "All right, if you don't want it, I'll put it back. The injection is optional anyway. Who am I to deny you the full experience of—"

"Doctor," the captain said again, squirming uncomfortably. "Just...get it over with."

Crusher smirked and pressed the hypospray to his slender neck.

"There," she said. "That wasn't so bad, was it."

Picard glared up at her.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you."

"More than you will ever know," she said, and smirked. "It's about time you men got a chance to experience how the other half lives."

Picard grunted and slid off the biobed, irritated to find his new frame stood several inches shorter than the statuesque doctor.

"You know, you could try heels," she suggested.

Picard muttered something unintelligible, followed by a grumbled, "If you need me, I'll be on the bridge."

Crusher and Ogawa shared a highly amused look across the busy room, then returned their primary attention to their patients.
To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References include TNG: Birthright, Part I; Tin Man; and The Most Toys.
Chapter Fourteen

Captain's Log, Supplemental…
Despite recent…complications…it has been decided that this evening’s Welcome Reception for the research scientists will go ahead as scheduled. All crewmembers affected by the Ihat virus – including myself – have been cleared for duty by Dr. Crusher except Mr. Data who, due to the extreme nature of his transformation, will remain on sick leave until deemed fit by the CMO and Counselor Troi. Commander La Forge and Mr. Barclay will, therefore, head the team to isolate and expunge the Ihat virus from the Enterprise computer, aided by Commander Soong who, despite his difficult circumstances, has continued to prove himself a valuable asset. I only hope we can isolate this ancient virus and reach Galor IV before this Ihat creature finds an opportunity to cause any more havoc…

"But, you have to admit, there is precedent, Doctor," Picard said, pacing the space in front of Crusher's office desk with a stride that put the Chief Medical Officer in mind of a caged tigress. "Remember the energy anomaly that struck my returning shuttlecraft on Stardate 46235.7 – an anomaly that caused my fellow passengers and I to rematerialize aboard the Enterprise as children. We used the transporter to restore us to our own bodies then. And, what of the time when Dr. Pulaski was infected by the genetically engineered children of Darwin Station? The disease altered her DNA, and we repaired it by using an older, unaltered DNA sample as a template to reverse the transposition while running her pattern through the transporter. Why shouldn't a similar procedure work in this case? If this Ihat creature has altered our DNA, our chromosomes, why can't we just enter our earlier patterns into the transporter to reverse the changes?"

"It's not as simple as that, Jean-Luc," the doctor said with a sigh. "In those cases, we were able to pinpoint exactly which genetic sequences had been corrupted and take steps to restore them. But this isn't a case of resetting a specific sequence of missing or slightly corrupted genetic code. Whatever Ihat did to you, the physical transformation was so complete, so thorough, that for all intents and purposes it is as if you had been born female. To change you back now would necessitate a fundamental modification of your chromosomal make-up, and that's something far more complex than any transporter system could handle. The tiniest mistake could result in devastating consequences. In other words, Jean-Luc," she leaned forward over her desk, "in my medical opinion, this plan is risky to the point of being foolhardy. Altering your gender at this point would be more a matter of surgery and extensive hormone therapy than some quick-fix with a transporter. And that's not even touching on the problem of Data and Danny. Androids don't have hormones or chromosomes. Or DNA, for that matter…"

She slouched back against her chair and tucked one leg under the other, her shoulders bowed under the weight of her frustration.

Picard knew how hard she was trying and the more rational part of his heart went out to her. If he had still been himself, housed securely in his own familiar body, he likely would have held out a hand to her, assured her of his deep regard. But, his anger and resentment over the physical violation he had suffered ran too deep to allow for much sympathy.

"Then, what do you suggest?" he demanded.
"I don't know yet," she ground out. "I need time."

Picard scowled his displeasure.

"I know it's not what you want to hear, Jean-Luc," Crusher snapped, "but until I have a chance to study this further, or that that creature decides to change you back to the way you were, you're just going to have to suck it up and take this like a man."

Picard's scowl darkened.

"Not exactly the most tactful choice of words, Doctor."

"Well, you haven't exactly been tactful about this either, Captain," the doctor countered. "This isn't some disease you've contracted. Yet, you've been acting as if this transformation is something you find shameful – even demeaning!"

"Shameful, no. Demeaning – hardly! Embarrassing: yes! You're not the one who will have to face those scientists this evening, Beverly. They'll be expecting to meet –"

"What? A strong leader?" the doctor cut in. "A commanding individual who exudes presence and authority?"

"Yes!" Picard snapped, then realized what he'd said.

Dr. Crusher raised an eyebrow, and the captain pursed his lips.

"Point taken, Doctor," he said, and his gaze dropped to his hands.

Beverly's expression softened. She unfolded herself from the chair and moved to his side.

"We tell ourselves we're equals," she said quietly. "That there's no double standard, that we've grown past any sense of gender bias. Yet for all our advances, the deeper, unspoken part of our culture still casts women as the 'weaker' sex. A good part of it is our fault, perhaps – our own tendency to second-guess ourselves, to doubt our strength, give in to intimidation, then hate ourselves for it. I've felt that pressure many times during my career, and I can tell you're feeling it now. You're physically smaller than you were, your voice no longer carries that deep, intimidating boom. You're vulnerable now in ways you never had to consider before. But, for all that, you're still Captain Picard. You can be every bit as commanding a presence as you ever were. And, however embarrassed you might feel about your current circumstances, I think you know that as long as you step up and take the reins with confident authority, no one will think to question you, or your orders."

She smiled.

"You have a unique opportunity here, Captain. A real chance to show the crew, to show yourself – and to affirm to Starfleet – that we're all people first, no matter our background, our appearance, or our gender."

Picard nodded, and squeezed her hand.

"I understand, Beverly," he said. "I truly do. But that doesn't change the fact that I am, and always have been, a heterosexual male. Facing the ship in female form feels, to me, like a cheap lie, and I'm not comfortable with that. I feel...unsure how to act, how to dress. I've no idea what I'm expected to do with all this hair – I've never plaited a woman's hair in my life! You spoke before of heels, and make-up..."
He grimaced despite himself, and Crusher's expression turned wry.

"I was teasing. You don't have to worry about any of that. Just put on a fresh uniform and have Mott do your hair. Or, brush it out and wear it down. I promise, you'll look beautiful."

Picard shot her an acerbic glare, but his twitching lips belied his irritation.

"Well," he said, straightening his shoulders and tugging imaginary wrinkles from his fitted, one-piece uniform. "It seems I have no choice but to take your advice. I'll leave you to your work, Doctor."

"You'll be great tonight, Jean-Luc," she said, and gave him a warm, genuine smile. "Make me proud."

*******

"You're taking all this surprisingly well," Troi said from Riker's couch. "Much better than I'd have expected."

Riker glanced at her reflection in his mirror, then focused back on his own.

"I don't know," he said, running a hand over his jawline, touching the faint lines near his eyes. "Maybe it just hasn't sunk in yet."

He straightened his posture and examined his profile, picking at the material of his snugly fitted uniform.

"Is it just me, or is the stuff they use to make women's uniforms a lot flimsier than the stuff they use for the men's?" he commented. "I always hated these one-piece things, anyway. What's wrong with a basic tunic and trousers?"

Troi smirked.

"I always felt the sleek lines complimented the female figure," she said.

"They sure don't leave much to the imagination," he said, frowning at his profile.

"You never complained before."

"I never had to wear them before," he said.

Turning from the mirror, he walked to the replicator.

"You want anything?" he asked, then chorused as she answered: "Hot chocolate."

"How did I know?" he teased, and placed the order, along with a black coffee for himself.

He carried their drinks to his coffee table and sat beside her on the couch.

"And how are you taking all this?" he asked softly.

She lowered her eyes, her short, dark curls framing her forehead.

"I feel…" she said, her voice a low rumble. "I feel incredibly…incredibly angry."

She clenched her fists in her lap, actively hating her thick, square fingers, the dark hairs at her wrists and knuckles. All the extra body hair, all the planes and angles where there should have been
curves…it all made her feel so uncomfortable, so...unfeminine.

"This is more than a physical violation," she said. "It's an assault on our identities, on who and what we are."

"Is it?" Riker asked. "I was always taught we were all people first. No matter how we might look on the outside."

"Maybe that's what they teach on Earth," Deanna said. "But it's different on Betazed. Our sexual identities are such a large part of who we are, how we perceive ourselves and interact with those around us. I've always been comfortable with that. But now…"

She frowned and looked into Will's eyes.

"Can we honestly say we're still the same people we were when we woke up this morning? Can you honestly tell me you feel the same way about me, when you look at me now, as you did yesterday?"

Riker squirmed uncomfortably, taking in her broad shoulders, the faint shadow of beard that colored her strong jawline.

"Deanna…"
"I don't know if this will help..." he started, then hesitated.

"Go on," Deanna encouraged.

"You know I never knew my mother," he said quietly. "She died when I was a baby. But I've seen pictures of her, heard my father's stories. I know what she was like. And..."

He sighed, his dark, wavy hair cascading forward to conceal his face. Deanna took his hand and he gave her a small, grateful smile, tucking his hair behind his ear. Then he stood and led her to the mirror.

"When I first saw...this," he gestured to his reflection. "My face, in the mirror... For a moment, I thought I was looking at her...my mother...and that she was staring back at me."

"Will..." Deanna started, but he shook his head.

"I'm older now than my mother ever got to be," he said. "But, I have always wanted to make her proud of me. If I... If I get angry about this, if I start questioning myself, doubting myself - my identity, and my ability to command - because of what that Ihat thing did to us, then I'm letting him win. I'm giving him what he wants. And, I don't think the woman in the mirror, there, would be too proud of that. Do you?"

Deanna pursed her lips and stared at their altered reflections, so foreign yet so familiar. And for the first time, when she looked at herself, she saw...

"Daddy..."

She reached for Riker's hand, and he took it with a supportive squeeze.

"We've got to stay strong, Deanna," he said, his eyes fixed on the reflections in the mirror. Shadows of the parents they barely knew. "For them, and for ourselves. We can't give Ihat the satisfaction of knowing how deeply he's rattled us."

"I understand," she said, starting to feel the spark of her customary confidence alight within her, spreading out slowly to fill her new form. "Thank you, Will."

"Any time, Imzadi," he assured her. "Any time."

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Chapter Fifteen

Danny had always been very good at dividing his attention. It was a talent that had allowed him to get through even the most tedious school and work assignments despite a persistent, compulsive preoccupation with his intense, endlessly cycling obsessions: early 20th century comedies and comedians, violin technique, acting, painting, poetry writing, Sherlock Holmes, just to name a few. This, though…

This was different.

It was an overwhelming thing, having a supercomputer linked up to his conscious awareness. In fact, for the first few hours after Geordi had 'activated' him, Danny had honestly doubted he'd be able to handle the experience without losing himself to the powerful tides of complex minutia that threatened to completely swamp the space behind his eyeballs.

Since his transformation, Danny found himself acutely aware of everything – absolutely everything – occurring both around and within him, from the tiniest twitch of his eyelid to number of nanoseconds it took for Barclay to clear his throat over at the neighboring workstation. His ability to process the sights and sounds and smells and sensations of his environment had become so fast and so intimate, in fact, that everyone around him seemed to operate at a noticeable lag – something he knew he'd find irritating...if he could feel irritation.

But, strangely…although Danny knew he should be disturbed by what had happened to him, terrified even, if only in some abstracted form, he just…wasn't. If anything, he was beginning to appreciate his new situation. He knew it would be a long time before he could control his new form's vast potential in anything approaching a natural way, but there was something innately satisfying about having such an immense, pristinely organized computational database at his personal disposal, knowing he could access any information, any time, at literally the speed of thought – and keep track of it all simultaneously.

Besides, there were definite advantages to having a mind that could operate so efficiently on so many different tracks.

Despite Danny's newly mechanical status and the fact that he was not an official member of the crew, the captain had seen fit to attach him to a diagnostic engineering team with ridiculously counterintuitive orders: namely, to sit down and systematically scan the entire computer matrix for traces of a highly advanced artificial consciousness that knew exactly how not to be found. Danny knew as well as anyone that finding Ihat had to be their top priority but, from what he'd seen of the being's abilities and his mercurial personality, he also knew that this systematic approach wasn't the way to do it. Unfortunately, he didn't have any viable alternatives to propose.

At least, not yet.

So, without voicing his misgivings, Danny had left his sleeping counterpart in Sickbay and obediently trailed Geordi and Barclay down to Engineering, where he'd helped the eager engineers adapt an appropriate program for the task. Then, Geordi had been called away to yet another staff meeting, leaving Danny and Barclay to start the scan without him.
Danny had dutifully sat at Geordi's station, but rather than devote his full resources to his assigned chore, he applied exactly twenty-five percent of his attention to following the scan's progress, and divided the rest among various research endeavors he'd been too exhausted or too short of time to follow up on before.

The first thing he confirmed was his suspicion that he and Data had not, in fact, swapped bodies as Dr. Crusher had supposed. Rather, they'd both been physically altered at an atomic (though not a quantum) level. The body he wore was his own straight down to its deviant quantum signature, equipped solely with his own memories and none of Data's experiences. While that realization opened up a fascinating line of inquiry regarding the philosophical and theological implications of both his and Data's transformations – implications so dizzying even his new positronic brain didn't have the resources to deal with them at the moment – it also explained why the 'emotion' chip Data had given him was still securely housed in his pocket.

As the scan dragged on, filtering through system after system, Danny followed his curiosity through Data's personal, family, and career records, sorting out the context he needed to effectively analyze the purpose and programming of Data's mysterious chip.

He learned that, in this universe, Lore had been responsible for the destruction of the Omicron Theta science colony; that Dr. Soong had left both Data and a deconstructed Lore behind when he and his injured wife had fled the scene for Terlina III.

He learned of Data's discovery and, inadvertent, activation by the Starfleet officers sent to investigate the tragedy, the controversy that had plagued Data's entry into Starfleet, and how Data had gone through most of his life with no knowledge of his origins - even the name of his creator.

He read about Dr. Soong's former colleague Dr. Ira Graves and his experiments translating human thought patterns into computer code. He read how Dr. Soong had followed up on his former mentor's controversial work, first transferring synaptic impressions from the doomed colonists into Data's brain, then applying the technique to his own dying wife, constructing an android in her image programmed with her memories, experiences, personality, and no knowledge of her mechanical status.

He studied Data's early interactions with Lore, how Lore had betrayed him time and again, finally using the emotion chip he had stolen from Dr. Soong to control Data by transmitting a carrier wave to remotely affect his responses…

After some eighteen minutes, Danny was so involved in soaking up the details of Data's past and mentally fitting the pieces into the puzzles he'd been juggling since he'd arrived, that it took him almost a full second to notice Barclay had left his station and taken up a hovering position over his shoulder. Even then, he refused to acknowledge the engineer. He was so close…so close to seeing the whole picture…how it was all connected…Lore's malfunction, Data's hidden dream program, Dr. Soong's mysterious chip, Lal's fatal system crash…

"Um…er…Co-Commander…?"

Danny finally turned a reluctant glance toward Lt. Barclay; intrigued, despite himself, at the way his brain continued following the information on the screen even though it had fallen into his peripheral vision, automatically subdividing his attention even as his conscious mind focused on his companion. It was a strange experience.

"Yes, Lieutenant?" he said.

"Sir… I was just… That is, I- I don't…"
Danny's senses may have been abstracted, but he was in no frame of mind for the shy officer's time-eating prevarications. He hoisted his expression into a scowl he didn't feel and snapped, "What is it?"

Barclay looked rather taken aback, then he took a deep, bracing breath and exhaled a rapid-fire stream of stumbling words.

"Well, sir, quite honestly, I don't believe we're going to find the virus this way. Hunting for traces, system by system- He's too smart for that. And, besides, after the way we flushed him out of Data's systems… He's got to be wise to our methods. What I mean is, we don't even know if this Ihat thing…being…entity…really is a…a computer virus at all. He's an AI – an artificial consciousness – a…a creature of data and energy. If we're going to lure him out…make him show himself…we're…we're going to need another approach. Something that will appeal to him…some sort of bait. I think."

"An intriguing proposal," Danny said, and meant it. "What would you suggest?"

"Well, um, I've been doing some research and…"

The 'lift doors opened and Geordi strode into Engineering. All eyes turned to him, but he waved his busy engineers back to work and headed straight for Danny and Barclay.

"The captain's getting impatient, and I can't blame him," he reported, leaning his palms against the console table and releasing a sigh. "He's got that big welcome reception coming up this evening for those research scientists, and we've got a rogue alien hiding out in our computer with the power to alter anyone and anything on this ship. I'm not even going to repeat what I heard Worf muttering after the meeting let out. His transformation notwithstanding, I wouldn't envy him his job tonight. After all, what can Security do against this kind of computer menace?"

At that prompt, several thousand possible permutations flooded Danny's mind. At a speed he still found astonishing, he took a few fractions of a second to fully examine each contingency, then a few more to work out the most promising odds for success. He was just opening his mouth to give voice to the initial results when Geordi shook his head, then glanced up.

"So, you guys get anywhere while I was gone?"

Danny swallowed his report and switched tracks at once, but allowed the calculations to continue unabated, several steps further back in his mind.

"Actually, Geordi," he said, "Mr. Barclay was about to explain his theory that, if we are to find – let alone trap – Ihat, we must first devise a suitable lure to draw him out from wherever he might be hiding."

Danny turned his eyes to the nervous diagnostician.

"You were saying, Lieutenant?"

Barclay swallowed hard, then straightened his posture and said, "Well, I've been doing some research and I think I've pinned him down. His character, that is. I mean, think about it: Who is Ihat, really? He's an archetype, isn't he – some larger-than-life mythical figure from a long-dead civilization. If you think of him that way, it's really not too much of a stretch to see him as a holodeck character brought to life – like…like Moriarty, almost."

Geordi frowned.

"Reg, I'm not sure that analogy really works. From what we've seen, Ihat—"
"I'm not saying we should treat him like a storybook villain," Barclay rushed to add. "Of course, he's much, much more than that, but... But, take the way he behaved on the bridge, how he described himself, his purpose... He crosses boundaries, challenges authority, and he can enact physical alterations. In almost every way, he fits the profile of the classic Trickster figure like...like, well..."

He backed toward his computer station and gestured to the screen.

"...like the ones listed here. Like Loki or Hermes or Coyote or Harpo Marx or Br'er Rabbit or Bugs Bunny or even...even Q. So, I was thinking, if this scan doesn't pin him down...which it probably won't...why not approach him from that angle? Why not play on his Trickster characteristics to trick him into revealing himself...on our terms? If he is an archived, alien mythical figure brought to life, he should have at least some of the same weaknesses as similar Trickster characters...don't you think?"

Geordi and Danny shared a glance, then looked back at Barclay, who was leaning against the computer as if drawing emotional support from a friend.

Geordi moved closer to peer at the screen. After a scrolling through a few pages, he said, "You know, Reg, you might be on to something here."

Barclay beamed despite himself.

"I think that does seem to have a particular connection with the holodeck," Danny observed, glancing at the text. "And my diagnostic program in particular. If we can set up a scenario that appeals to the Trickster attributes you described, we may be able to reprogram my diagnostic brain to serve both as a host and a trap for the Ihat program. A trap from which he could not escape, but through which we could speak and interact with him."

"Yes, yes, that's just what I'm suggesting!" Barclay said excitedly. "Use the holodeck scenario to attract his interest, get him to drop his guard, then – snap! We'll catch him in his own net, the same way the Norse gods caught Loki!"

"Then let's get started," Geordi said, and clapped them both on the shoulder before taking a seat at his own station. "We'll keep the scan going just in case. Now, what sort of scenario do you think would be most likely to capture a Trickster's attention?"

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Data lay flat on the diagnostic bed and stared up at the ceiling, letting his eyes focus, then unfocus, then focus again. He folded his hands over his chest and took in a deep, slow breath, noting the coolness of the air, how it dried his tongue just slightly, the feel of his lungs expanding and contracting, the steady beat of his heart. His stomach gurgled, but he didn't think he was hungry. Thirsty, maybe, but if he asked for another drink of water he worried he might have to use the bathroom again, and that was not an experience he wanted to repeat so soon after the first time.

It was bizarre, but despite his years of expertise as an exobiology specialist, many of the most mundane biological functions had stubbornly remained complete mysteries to him. Simple, basic things like sneezing, or getting goosebumps, or knowing what it felt like to get hit on the funnybone... He understood them all intellectually, of course – could lecture on the hows and whys for hours, in fact, if he ever found anyone interested enough to listen – but the physical experience... That was something else entirely. And, as he was learning, it wasn't entirely pleasant.

His surface thoughts were a confused muddle of stray notions, anxious fears, and unfamiliar physical sensations, but he was starting to get used to that. What really bothered him was the strange sense
of…disconnect…he experienced every time he tried to access his core memory. Instead of appearing on command, clear and vibrant, the information he sought came to him with a distanced, almost dreamlike quality and, usually, only after a prolonged hunt – a process he found immensely frustrating. He’d hear Dr. Crusher or one of her nurses mention a crewman’s name, or use some scientific term to describe a pathogen or an anatomical feature, and it would seem familiar, yet the information was not readily accessible. He would have to expend a great deal of effort sifting and sorting through half-remembered vocabulary and half-faded crew-profile images before the desired data suddenly sprang to light and, even then, there was some doubt attached.

The information was in there, he could feel it was all in there, but his computer clarity was gone, and so was the calm confidence that went with it. And that scared him. The very thought filled him with a deep, trembling anxiety that tensed the muscles of his back, quickened his heart rate, and tightened his gut.

Counselor Troi had assured him this anxiety was a normal reaction, a natural response to losing his connection to the vast data storage and processing computer that had been his brain, but that knowledge didn't make the anxious feeling go away. If anything, it made it worse. After all, how could he function, how could he hope to do his job effectively, if he doubted the veracity of his own memory?

"Well, Data, I have some good news for you," said Dr. Crusher, her sudden presence by his bedside startling him out of his thoughts. That was another thing he was going to have to get used to: his disturbing inability to keep up an ongoing awareness of his surroundings for more than a few minutes at a time – and his inability to accurately clock those minutes without an external frame of reference. Suddenly, the little digital clock display that was present in the bottom corner of most public computer consoles and data padds – something he'd always found rather puzzling before – made perfect sense to him.

Data sat up with slow, deliberate movements and swung his feet over the side of the bed. Dr. Crusher smiled.

"I've talked it over with Counselor Troi and we both agree, you're cleared to go," she said.

"Does this mean I can return to duty?" Data asked, unable to keep the nervousness from his voice.

"Not quite yet, but you can leave Sickbay," she said, and patted his hand. "Don't look so disappointed, Data. Considering what you've been through, you've made excellent progress so far. But, you must understand you're going to need time to acclimate to your new body before we can clear you for active duty."

"I do," Data acknowledged, his eyes fixed on his boots. He didn't say what was on his mind, though. The fact that Danny had been allowed to go back to work while he had been kept under supervision in Sickbay. The fact that Danny now had the strength, speed, intellectual capacity, and calm confidence of an android while Data…

Data felt like a quivering, self-doubting mess.

"That's good," Crusher said, ducking her head until she could catch his eyes with hers. "Now, I want you to take some time for yourself, get more comfortable with your new situation, both physically and mentally. Take a walk through the arboretum, play some chess, practice your violin. And, if you feel any discomfort, anything at all, you can contact me right away. OK?"

Data nodded, though his fingers had gone white from clutching the side of the bed so hard.
"I understand, Doctor," he said, and slid to his feet. "Thank you."

Crusher's expression softened, and she squeezed his shoulder.

"You'll be just fine, Data," she said. "We're all rooting for you. It's not everyone who gets the chance to live his fondest wish…even if it's just for a short time."

"Yes…"

"Go," Crusher said, and gave him a gentle push in the direction of the door. "Go home. Feed your cat. Have some fun! Don't let this chance slip by. With any luck, you'll be back to your normal self before you know it."

"Perhaps," Data said, and offered her a small, unpracticed smile. "Will you be attending the reception tonight, Doctor?"

"Wouldn't miss it. And you?"

Data straightened his posture, attempting to sound more confident than he felt.

"I believe I will 'drop in'," he said. "It could be an edifying experience."

"I'll see you there, then," Crusher said. "Save a dance for me."

Data's smile broadened, just for a moment. Then, he turned on his heel and strode out into the corridor where, for the first time in his life, he became just one human being among the hundreds of others roaming around the ship.

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References include TNG: Ship in a Bottle, Descent, Brothers, Datalore, The Schizoid Man, Inheritance, Data's Day, The Measure of a Man, the movie First Contact, and the novel Metamorphosis; Harpo Marx as Trickster by Charlene Fix, and The Downfall of the Gods by Villy Sorensen.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Sixteen

Picard straightened his dress uniform and scowled critically at his reflection.

"Passable…" he muttered, turning from side to side.

After some awkward internal debate, the captain had opted for a mid-heeled shoe – similar in style to what Beverly wore on duty – only to find the few inches they added to his height made a surprising difference in his outlook. It was a little embarrassing to admit but, standing closer to his own familiar height, Picard felt more confident, more like himself than he had since his transformation.

Not that he'd ever admit that to Beverly…or Troi…

Sweeping a hand over his hair to smooth away any stray wisps that may have escaped from his braid, the captain nodded once, straightened his slender shoulders, and headed for the door to his quarters, ready to face the reception ahead.

Before he could reach the door, though, the comm unit on his desk chirped.

Picard sighed and went to answer it.

"Picard," he snapped.

"There's an incoming message for you, sir, from Galor IV," Worf responded. "It is Admiral Haftel."

Worf spoke the name with distaste – a sentiment Picard, frankly, shared. It had been Haftel's arrogant interference that had sent Data's daughter, Lal, spiraling into the cascade failure that had ended her life. Data had never voiced a complaint, and had even cooperated with Haftel and his similarly abrasive colleague, Commander Bruce Maddox, on several cybernetics projects since then. Data's friends, however, were less forgiving.

"Merde…"

Picard sighed, and sank into his desk chair. Haftel was one of the last people he'd want to confront in his present condition.

"Patch him through, Mr. Worf," he said, and activated his viewscreen.

The admiral's square, sagging features faded onto the screen. Before Picard could greet him, though, the old man's stern expression twitched, then cracked all together. He quickly turned away, trying to cover his convulsive laugh with a spate of coughing.

Picard was not amused.

"Good God," the admiral wheezed as he fought to recover his dignity. "I'd heard there'd been some peculiar goings on aboard your ship, Picard, but I never—"

"Yes, yes, we're all coping as best we can," Picard said impatiently. "But, as the Enterprise is not due to arrive at Galor IV until —"
The admiral spoke over him with a pushy authority that made Picard's teeth grate.

"Captain, I'll get straight to the point," he said. "It's clear from your reports, and from your current appearance, that the D'Arsayan AI infecting your systems is entirely out of your league."

"Admiral, I would argue –"

"In addition," the admiral continued, "there's the issue of this Commander Soong I've been reading about."

"Well, as I explained in –"

"The long and the short of it is, Captain," Haftel said, his voice a deep, resonant contrast to Picard's softer tones, "I'm coming aboard, and I'm bringing a team of trained specialists with me. –And, before you say anything," he raised a hand, "my team and I have already been en route for the past eight hours, so there's no use in making excuses. You can expect our arrival at 0715 tomorrow morning. We'll continue this discussion then. Haftel out."

The screen flicked to the standard Starfleet logo. Picard slammed the control to turn it off and stalked out the door into the corridor, muttering a few colorful French metaphors under his breath as he went.

Still, at least one good thing had come of the admiral's message, the captain reflected as he stormed his way into the turbolift: he was now too angry to feel any anxiety about presenting himself to the research scientists in Ten Forward.

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"I don't understand why this isn't working," Barclay said, his nervous voice muffled by exposed machinery as he crawled deeper into the holodeck's controls. "Every scan we've run so far insists this system is clean!"

"Ihat must have adapted his code again," Geordi grumbled. "The guy's like a chameleon."

"The ability to shapeshift is a classic Trickster trait," Danny pointed out.

Geordi shook his head in exasperation and walked back to the touchpad on the wall.

"Computer, arch," he commanded.

The computer chirped its acknowledgement, but aside from a slight fizzing sound, nothing happened.

"Damn…" Geordi wiped a tired hand over his face. "We've been at this for over half an hour now," he said. "Forget us setting a trap for him. If I didn't know better, I'd say this Ihat character sabotaged the holodeck computer to keep us distracted. But, distracted from what? What's this guy up to?"

"The arch you requested is being generated, Commander," Barclay reported from his awkward position half-in and half-out of the wall. "But…there's something strange. It looks like…like there's some sort of block in place. I think… I think holodeck commands are being diverted…"

"Diverted where?" Danny asked.

"Sorry…just a minute, sir…"

Barclay grunted and backed carefully out of the wall until he could straighten up and face his superior officers, his expression pensive.
"There is a program running all right," he said, wiping imaginary dust from his hands to his uniform's trousers. "Just not in this holodeck. Or any of the others. I'm not quite sure what Ihat did…at first glance, the code is all a jumbled mess…but, once you start puzzling out the—"

"Reg," Geordi broke in, "we don't have time for the full report. For now, just give us the basics, OK?"

"Ten Forward," the engineer reported efficiently.

Geordi waited a beat, but when no more information seemed to be forthcoming he said, "We'll need it a little less basic than that."

"He disguised it pretty well, but I think Ihat has tapped into the virtual chess program installed in some of the gaming tables there," Barclay explained. "That's where it looks like his coded instructions to the holodeck computer are being diverted, anyway."

"Wait – do you mean my arch—"

"No, no, the arch you requested was generated but blocked at the source before it could be projected. Whatever Ihat has running up in Ten Forward is something else – either a written program, or…well, it might even be a way for Ihat to project himself a physical form, like he did on the bridge."

"In other words, you mean that creep's planning to crash the reception." Geordi scowled. "Great. The captain's going to love that. So, what can we do to block him?"

"I-I'm not really sure," Barclay admitted, twisting his hands in front of him. "The code's pretty dense, and I—"

"If I might make a suggestion?" Danny spoke up.

"Yeah, go ahead," Geordi snapped.

Danny gave him as sympathetic a look as he could manage, recognizing that the engineer's irritability stemmed as much from exhaustion as from frustration.

"Perhaps, if you and I went to Ten Forward and examined the gaming tables while Mr. Barclay remained here to monitor any effects on the program—"

"We could still find a way to cut Ihat off before he has a chance to wreck the reception," Geordi finished, his voice brightening with renewed enthusiasm. He checked the time on his padd. "We'll have to work fast, though. The meet-and-greet part's already underway. You'll be all right here, Reg?"

Barclay swallowed, trying not to let his eyes dart around the dim, gridded space that somehow managed to make him feel agoraphobic and claustrophobic at the same time.

"Oh…I'll be fine, sir. I-I can keep watch…on my own."

"We'll keep a channel open," Geordi assured him, and clapped Danny on the shoulder. "Come on, Danny, let's go."

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To say "Worf was not happy" would have been an egregious understatement – especially given the scene he had just endured with Counselor Troi and his son, Alexander.
A large part of his irritation could be chalked down to typical human hypocrisy. In the Klingon Empire, tradition had long kept females from serving in the military, holding prominent political offices and, in some regions, even participating in public life, but even in ancient times females who had proven themselves in conflict had been acknowledged, and respected, as true Klingon warriors, welcomed by Kahless into Sto-vo-kor. It was that indomitable spirit, that warrior’s core, that Worf had recognized in Tasha Yar, his predecessor as Security Chief aboard the Enterprise, from his first day aboard, and he had accordingly accepted her authority without question. It had been different with many of his human colleagues, both male and female…though they had learned early on that any derogatory comments regarding the petite young woman's ability to head the security department would not be tolerated in Worf's presence.

Such attitudes had baffled Worf then, and they continued to baffle him now. Unlike the Klingons, Human tradition had long acknowledged females as being legal equals with males, welcome to participate fully in education, business, politics, the military, and any other aspect of public life. Yet, strangely, there remained an unspoken pressure on human women to 'prove' themselves, particularly when taking on supposedly 'male' roles…like Security Chief. Worf had witnessed the backhanded compliments, the snide asides that had made Tasha's pale face burn red. She had never dignified such spiteful comments with a response, except to work that much harder to excel at her profession.

And now, it was happening to him. Already, he had endured several unwelcome jokes and barbs from his human security officers regarding his transformation. A few pointed glares and growls had been enough to silence them, at least for the moment, but Worf's anger lingered, flaring again when he had seen that same unbecoming amusement perking on his son's young face.

Worf felt no shame in wearing a female form. He knew his heart was still the same, his mind and soul unchanged. What angered him was the fact that the change had been imposed upon him in what amounted to a physical assault by an alien intelligence – an alien against whom he still had no truly effective defense. He had explained this to Alexander, and to Troi, who was clearly struggling to come to terms with her own transformation. He had made it very clear that he would do what he always did in times of adversity: recall the example established by his fallen predecessor and honor her legacy to the best of his ability. That had wiped the laughter from his son's face, and seemed to strike a chord with Troi.

Worf's only worry now, as he straightened his sash and marched into Ten Forward, was whether he would be able to live up to that vow with an unpredictable being like that loose on the ship. And that was a problem that would have galled him in any form.

******

Data sat at the bar and took in a deep whiff of the tantalizing smells wafting from the elegant buffet spread out over the long, polished counter. Ten Forward was a blur of sensory stimuli -- sounds, smells, colors, movement, smiles, laughter, friendly chatter. The whole place was alive with people, all dressed in their finest apparel, all eager to introduce themselves and get to know others. Data found the whole crowded, milling scene exciting, inviting… and yet inexplicably terrifying, as if an invisible, emotional wall separated him from the easy camaraderie of the larger group.

Could this awkward feeling be what humans referred to when they spoke of the need to "break the ice" between people? He did not feel particularly cold or 'ice-bound' sitting alone in the corner, but there was a discomfiting sense of isolation that he supposed could be described as 'cold' in a metaphorical sense.

Data straightened his back, scanning the crowd for a familiar face who might be able to offer some advice on just how one went about attempting to "break the ice," when—
"Hi there," a woman's voice greeted from the seat beside his.

Data cocked his head at the pale brunette. Her greeting and expression were uncomfortably ambiguous, prompting him to wonder anxiously how one human determined whether another human was being friendly or flirtatious.

The woman solved his dilemma by holding out her hand. Relieved, Data returned the friendly gesture with a firm shake.

"I'm Nora Maskelyne," she said with a sociable smile. "From the research station. I take it from your uniform you're a...let me see...gold is either Security, Engineering, or...what's the other one...?"

"Operations," Data supplied helpfully. "I am Lt. Commander Data, Chief Operations Officer aboard the Enterprise."

"Right, I knew that," the woman said. "About the uniform, I mean, not your name. Sorry, I tend to babble when I get nervous."

"Are you nervous too?" Data asked, genuinely surprised.

The woman shrugged and fidgeted in her chair.

"I don't know. I've never been good with crowds. Guess that's why I've spent the last ten years working in near-isolation," she said, and sighed. "It's been so long now...the prospect of returning to civilization, presenting our findings at the Daystrom Institute...in front of all those people... I know a lot of my colleagues have been looking forward to this, but I have to admit, I've been rather dreading it all. Still, here I am."

"Yes," Data agreed, and turned the topic to something of more immediate interest. "Do you enjoy buffet meals?"

She glanced at the colorful spread.

"It does look good, doesn't it," she said, then ducked her head. "But, isn't that the cliché? The shy wallflower, hiding behind a full plate to avoid conversation?"

"You are conversing with me," Data pointed out.

Nora regarded him with an expression he couldn't quite decipher. Before he could get nervous, though, she said, "You know what? You're right," and grabbed a plate for him, and one for herself.

"You're going to have to guide me through this fancy spread," she told him. "I've been living off standard rations for so long now I'm afraid I've forgotten what real food tastes like."

"Then we are 'in the same boat," Data said. "Aside from the chicken soup and cranberry juice I sampled in Sickbay this afternoon, I have never 'tasted' real food before. At least, not in the way humans experience taste."

"What do you mean?" Nora asked.

Data opened his mouth, fully prepared to tell her all about himself and the transformation he'd undergone just that morning.

Then, he reconsidered.

It had long been an object of speculation among cyberneticists and Starfleet authorities whether Data
could successfully pass himself off as an organic humanoid without 'giving away' his true mechanical nature. But, this woman did not know the android he had been, only the human she saw before her. In that sense, she represented a 'clean slate,' a spontaneous encounter with the potential to finally put the debate to bed, as it were. Could Data behave like the human he now appeared to be without arousing this woman's suspicions?

"Nothing. I apologize," he said, and offered her a smile he had learned by closely observing Commander Riker. "Perhaps you might wish to start with this dish? These are called 'nachos' – a delicacy quite popular on Earth."

"So I've heard."

Nora laughed and scooped a pile of layered corn chips, cheese, meat, and vegetables onto her plate. As she did, Data's carefully practiced smile warmed to something far more genuine. It looked like his experiment was off to a promising start.

*******

Worf stood in front of the wall opposite the entrance to Ten Forward and glowered at the crowd over his folded arms, on the alert for anything that might indicate that's unwelcome presence. So far, it seemed the meet-and-greet was going well. The research scientists and Enterprise crew were mingling smoothly enough, and there was no outward suggestion of tension or trouble. The captain stood talking amicably with Counselor Troi, Commander Riker, and Dr. Dumont, who had headed the research station. Data was engaged in a surprisingly giggly conversation with a shy looking scientist, and Guinan was floating about the room with a calm and elegant grace; the perfect hostess.

Then, Worf became aware of a presence at his side. He glanced down…into the broad grin of a strange little man in a worn raincoat. Tufts of curly, reddish-blond hair stuck out from under his battered hat, and he carried a long, black cane tucked in his belt like a sword.

"Who are you?" Worf demanded.

The man didn't answer. He just kept smiling that wide, manic smile.

Worf stepped away.

The man closed the distance and leaned against Worf's side.

Honk!

Worf jumped despite himself and grabbed the man's long, hollow cane, which he now saw had a bulbous horn taped to its top.

"If this is some sort of joke—"

He made to grab for the little man but somehow only managed to hook his knee, leaving the man leaning casually against him as if Worf were a lamppost on a street corner. Worf shook him off with a growl and slapped his combadge. The man mimicked the motion, and Worf's scowl. Worf glared – a look the man also mimicked before breaking up in a fit of silent, thigh-slapping laughter.

Worf seized him by the collar of his raincoat and held him, half dangling, half struggling, while he spoke: "Worf to Engineering! Erect the firewall! Immediately!"

"The firewall is already active, sir," Geordi's assistant, Lt. Farrell, answered.
"Strengthen it," Worf ordered. "I believe Ihat has infiltrated Ten Forward."

"But sir, I don't see any indication of—"

"Excuse me, lady, but has-a my brother been-a botherin' you?"

Worf broke the connection with Engineering and glowered down at the newcomer: a dark-haired man in a short greenish jacket and softly pointed green hat.

"You know this man?" he demanded irritably. If there were two of these characters, they couldn't both be Ihat. …Or, could they?

"Sure! That's-a my brother!" the man asserted in an accent that might have been Italian. "He no speak, but he sure gotta good eye for the ladies, eh?"

"What about you?"

"I-a got a good eye too. Two of 'em. That's-a why I come here," he said, and smiled. "You got somethin' lady. In fact, you got It. And you can keep it. –Say-a, lady, you like games?"

"No," Worf grunted, and reluctantly released his weirdly grinning captive. As soon as he was free, the little man snatched his horn from Worf's other hand and slid it triumphantly back into his belt.

"We play all sortsa games," his brother informed Worf. "Bridge, poker, pinochle… You name it, we play it. You know, you look like a gal who likes the action. Hows about you and me get outta here, just-a the two of us. I know a little place…"

The dark haired man prattled on, his suggestions growing more and more direct. Worf stared down at him in growing amazement. This man, whoever he was, stood a good half-foot shorter than Worf, even in his current form, yet here he was, openly flirting with the grim security chief without a trace of the self-consciousness Worf had come to associate with humans.

As his brother kept talking, the redhead seemed to be getting exasperated—until, he noticed an almost invisible thread hanging from the hem of Worf's long dress uniform. He waved for Worf's attention, but soon decided it would be simpler to deal with the problem himself.

Pulling a sharp pair of scissors from an inside pocket of his raincoat, the little man snipped at the thread…unfortunately taking a sliver of hem off along with it. Horrified by his slip-up, he worked quickly to even out the edge of Worf's uniform, but only succeeded in making it more obviously uneven.

Thinking quickly, he snuck around to Worf's other side and made a few snips there. But, when he regarded his work from a distance, he realized he'd made that side too short. There was only one thing for it. He crept behind Worf and snipped around the entire hem, taking off a good two inches. Two undeniably jagged inches.

Shaking his head, the little man went back to work, snipping and clipping, clipping and trimming…

"So, you're-a really a lady policeman," the man's brother was saying, his whole attention fixed on Worf's face. "I never woulda guessed it, a dame like you workin' as a cop. Well, if you're on duty, we don't wanna bother you. We'll just go grab-a some food before the show starts. Come on, Rusty, time to go."

The curly-haired man nodded gamely and deftly tucked his scissors away. As the two men made
their way through the crowd, arm in arm, the Italian called over his shoulder, "By the way, lady, you gotta thread stickin' out from your uniform."

Worf frowned and glanced down...

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Danny stopped short some ten yards from Ten Forward. Geordi frowned up at him.

"What's wrong?"

"I believe Ihat has already made his appearance."

"What makes you so sure?" Geordi asked.

"I just heard Worf yell. He sounded most upset."

"Let's get in there, then, before it's too late to stop him!"

Danny tilted his head.

"What makes you think it is not already too late?"

"I meant Worf!" Geordi said.

Danny considered, nodded, and the two of them ran the rest of the way to Ten Forward.

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References include TNG: The Offspring, The Measure of A Man, Code of Honor, Skin of Evil, The Most Toys and Time's Arrow I, the TNG novel Metamorphosis, and pretty much all of the Marx Brothers' movies; specifically The Cocoanuts, Animal Crackers, Monkey Business, Horsefeathers, and Go West.

And to any Groucho fans out there...he'll be showing up in the next chapter specifically to pester Picard. Stay Tuned! :)
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

And now, the one and only Groucho in one of his favorite roles: the famous Dr. Hackenbush! I hope you enjoy this next part. Please let me know what you think! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Seventeen

"And so we made camp right there and watched them, all through the night," Dr. Dumont said. "These beautiful crystals, flashing and twinkling in the darkness of that bleak, sandy valley. I think it was Nora who said they put her in mind of ancient fishing boats back on Earth, flashing coded signals to each other across choppy nighttime waters."

Picard smiled at the image, and set his wine glass on the table beside his plate.

"You know, Doctor, I find what you've been saying about those crystal structures quite fascinating," he told her.

"Please, it's Maggie," she said graciously. "But do go on."

"Well," Picard said, "some years ago, the Enterprise encountered a similar phenomenon, on a planet called Velara III. In that case, the crystals were so small as to be, essentially, microscopic, but they existed in a thin layer of highly saline water just under the sand's surface. It took our Mr. Data to determine these tiny crystals were actually life forms...and that they were intelligent."

"Intelligent silicate life!" Maggie exclaimed. "What a discovery!"

Picard took a sip of wine and nodded.

"Oh, absolutely," he said. "We found that these...beings, I suppose...were photoelectric, absorbing sunlight then rebroadcasting it in the form of flash patterns that functioned rather like computer program instructions. You see, the saline water interlinked each crystal to create what was, essentially, a natural superconductor array – a living supercomputer with which we could communicate. In fact, from their perspective, it was we who were the primitive life forms."

"Incredible," Maggie said, her eyes wide with the wonder of a true scientist. "If only we'd known... Now I wonder if the flash patterns we saw that night might not have been a form of communication. Can you imagine? Living crystals calling to each other across the desert..." She chuckled. "You know, we might have to organize a second research team after all. But that's why we're all out here, isn't it? To explore strange new worlds?"

"To seek out new life, and new civilizations," Picard added, and raised his glass.

"And you found talking sand crystals, eh?" a sharp voice cut in. "A stranger tale, I've never heard. So tell me ladies, uh, is this seat taken?"

Picard frowned up at the newcomer: a faintly seedy little man with neatly parted dark hair, round, old-fashioned glasses, a long, black coat, and a mustache and eyebrows that seemed oddly false, as if
they had been painted on his narrow face.

Picard and Dumont shared a questionng look but, before Picard could speak, Dumont said in her gracious way, "Not at all. Please sit down."

The man slid into the vacant chair before she'd finished speaking and lounged his elbows comfortably on the table.

Picard’s frown deepened and he scanned the room for Worf. He spied his security chief near the bar, thoroughly occupied with two oddly dressed men Picard didn't recognize. It appeared the one with the red hair and crushed hat had cut Worf's dress uniform short with a pair of silver scissors. As Picard watched, the Klingon roared his outrage and dove for the two men, who took off in separate directions.

A muscle in Picard's jaw clenched and he turned two blazing eyes on the mustached intruder.

"I'll have you know I am not in the mood for games, Ihat."

The man's eyebrows raised above his glasses.

"Ihat? You must have me confused with some other madman. Allow me to introduce myself." He shot to his feet and bowed. "The name is Dr. Hackenbush. Dr. Hugo Z. Hackenbush. And you? You must be—"

"Captain Picard."

"Ah! What do you know, a lady Captain!" He slunk in close, waggling his eyebrows rather suggestively. "And such a lovely lady too."

Before Picard could react, the man jumped on his lap and draped his arms around the captain's neck.

"Tell me, Cap, are you married? Does your job pay well? Answer the second question first."

"We don't use money!" Picard grunted, struggling to push the man away. "What is this—"

"No money!" the man exclaimed. "Not a single simoleon? Oh, well, in that case…"

The mustached man abandoned the flustered captain and offered his hand to Dr. Dumont, along with a formal little bow.

"You look like a lady of means and girth – uh, stature. How is it we've never met before?"

She took his hand with an awkward frown and, apparently feeling she should say something, declared, "I'm sure you're welcome here, Dr. Hackenbush."

The little man seemed affronted. He pulled his hand away with a huff.

"Well, if that's the case, I'll go."

Dr. Dumont blinked in confusion.

"But…I don't understand…"

"The only reason that I came is so that I can go," the man stated in a sing-song voice and offered the pair a dainty wave. "Tra la!"
Picard stood.

"Stop," he ordered.

The man froze, then turned and dashed back to his seat, tucking his folded hands under his chin and smiling sweetly up at the captain.

"So you do care!" he said, and fluttered his eyelids. Picard recoiled slightly. "Well, if you insist on putting me up, I could stay for a day or two. Maybe a week. But I'm telling you, I really must be going."

Picard folded his arms. He'd encountered powerful tricksters before, Q among them, and he knew better than to be fooled by an assumed guise. If this man wasn't Ihat, he and the other two oddly dressed strangers...who, rather than hiding from the Klingon's wrath, were still actively provoking Worf and seeming to enjoy it - tapping him on the shoulder and ducking under tables...could very well be more incarnated personas from the D'Arsay archive – a possibility with terrible implications Picard really didn't want to contemplate.

Still, the strangers seemed harmless enough at the moment, and Picard was aware it was up to him to keep them that way, especially in room this crowded. He'd have to find a way to assert his authority without sparking their anger or otherwise putting these beings on the defensive until he and his officers could determine how to effectively contain them.

"Before you go anywhere, I'm going to need you to answer a few questions," he said, his tone as imperious as he could make it. "Who exactly are you, and how did you get on this ship?"

"I knew it was past time for a song cue, but I gotta say, that's not the catchiest I've ever heard. How about this," the man said, and assumed a tough attitude. "You can grill me all you like, Captain. I'll never sing!"

Picard furrowed his brow.

"All right, I'll sing," the man gave in. "But only if you take harmony. Do you know the words to 'Lydia'? How about 'Waltz Me Around Again Willie'? How about you?" he turned to Dumont. "You look like you could belt out an aria or two."

She gave him a bewildered smile, but his attention had already shifted back to Picard. He jumped up from his chair, took the Captain's hands in his, and pressed in close.

"O Captain! My Captain!" he sighed. "Do you remember the night you fell in the lake? The stars were shining over Cleveland. Ah, how we danced! Wheee!"

He twisted Picard's arm up over his head, forcing the outraged captain into a twirl, then led him back and forth around the table in a stooped sort of tango. Picard shook himself free and straightened his dress uniform.

"I've had quite enough!" he snapped, flushed bright red and struggling to recapture his dignity.

"Well, if you're sure," the man said and snatched a few grapes from Picard's plate. "I think I could manage another course or two."

Picard clenched his fists and struggled to maintain a calm, professional tone.

"You will tell me why you're here, or—"
"Hm? Who, me? Why am I here?" the man muffled around his mouthful. He swallowed, and said, "I come when I'm called, so long as the pay is good and the patient is house trained. I am a doctor, after all. I have my standards."

"And what about them?" Picard said, gesturing to the two strange men - now apparently absorbed in a 3D chess game. The strangers were being observed very closely by a deeply scowling Worf and by Geordi and Danny, who had dashed into the room shortly following Worf's uniform fiasco. The two of officers hovered over the peculiar pair, scanning them with tricorders, while the two players gestured for them not to interrupt their game. "I assume they're with you."

Dr. Hackenbush spared the pair a glance over his shoulder.

"Them? Nobody calls for them. You just rub a lamp, and they appear," he said and called out over the crowd, "Hey, was it you who sent for me this time, Ravelli?"

The Italian in the softly pointed green hat called back without looking up from the game.

"No, not-a me, Boss."

The redhead climbed up on his chair and pounded his chest.

Hackenbush looked enlightened.

"Oh, so it was you! I should have known when I got this blank piece of paper in my mailbox," he said, pulling a crumpled scrap of paper from his pocket and smoothing it on the table.

A moment later, Rusty was leaning over his shoulder. The redhead reached into his battered raincoat, retrieved a small bottle of ink, a potato-like blotter, and a quill pen with a long, wiggly feather, then dipped the quill in the ink and scratched a huge, spattery X across the paper. He blotted it neatly, and presented his work to Hackenbush, who looked mildly impressed.

"Ah, I didn't know you could write," he said, and tucked the paper away again while Rusty repacked his writing supplies—somehow managing to include the forks, knives, shiny cloth napkins, and salt and pepper shakers he'd found on the table in the sweep. "What else can you do?"

Rusty grinned a wicked grin and rubbed his hands together. He then reached into his pocket and pulled out the tiniest harmonica Picard had ever seen.

"A mini harp, eh?" Hackenbush said.

"Whatever can you do with that tiny thing?" Dr. Dumont asked. "Why it can't be more than three centimeters long!"

Rusty held up a finger, as if to say 'wait and see,' and brought the miniature instrument to his lips. Using his foot to tap out a beat in two-four time, he launched into an energetic rendition of 'Turkey in the Straw'.

A crowd gathered as he played, including Geordi, Guinan, Riker, Data, his new friend Nora Maskelyne, and a very wide-eyed Danny Soong. Worf glowered from the sidelines, quietly summoning a few back up officers...and a fresh uniform.

Rusty finished his tune and grinned brightly at all the smiling faces, bowing in the four cardinal directions as the crowd clapped and cheered. He stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled his appreciation, gesturing happily to Hackenbush while holding up his mini harp.
Ravelli reached for the tiny instrument.

"Hey, let me see that."

Rusty stuck out his lip and snatched the harmonica back. Ravelli stepped in, but Rusty pushed him away and shoved the instrument in his pocket, then stood facing his older brother with his chin up and defiant.

"Ah, I see. So-a you wanna fight, eh?" Ravelli said, getting into a boxer's stance. "Put 'em up."

"Stop this nonsense right now," Picard ordered. "There will be no fighting on this ship."

"Aw, let 'em fight, Cap," Hackenbush said. "With any luck they'll kill each other, then you'll be down two headaches."

Rusty's eyes widened and he advanced on the mustached man, but Hackenbush held up his hands in surrender.

"No, not me!" he said, and pointed to Ravelli. "He's the one who snatched your mini harp, remember?"

Rusty eagerly sank back into a fighting stance and started swinging his right arm toward Ravelli.

"You-a wanna lay it right-a here, on-a the button," Ravelli advised, pointing to his own chin, as if he were suddenly Rusty's coach rather than his opponent. Rusty nodded and took careful aim. Then he swung his arm way back and kicked Ravelli in the pants with his foot.

"Wha!" Ravelli jumped. "What's a matter for you, you kick-a downstairs! I tell-a you to hit-a upstairs, no-a downstairs! Why for you-a never listen when-a I talk, eh?"

Rusty looked cowed, his shoulders hunched. Ravelli took pity on him and gave him an encouraging pat on the shoulder.

"There," he said. "I'll-a let-a you try it jus' one-a more time, OK? Now-a you know to hit-a upstairs."

Rusty nodded, his face locked in concentration as he slowly brought his fist to his brother's chin.

"Yeah, that's-a right. You hit on-a the button."

Still slow and careful, Rusty pulled back his arm and kicked Ravelli in the pants with his foot.

The crowd clapped and laughed, apparently thinking this was all a planned part of the reception. Ravelli launched into a stream of what sounded like abusive Italian, but Rusty's face was a wicked smile as he leaned proudly against the table and began munching on a croissant he'd lifted from Picard's abandoned plate.

"Hey, that's-a a good idea. I could use a snack," Hackenbush said, pushing his way between the two men to grab Picard's pickle. He held it between his fingers like a cigar, but before he could take a bite, Rusty whipped out his scissors and snipped the pickle in half.

"Ah," Hackenbush said dryly, tossing the remains back on the plate. "So that's why they call 'em half-sours."

Ravelli broke up laughing, but Picard was not amused. Gesturing to the three intruders and his senior officers he snapped, "All of you. With me. Now. Guinan, I'll need your office."
"You're welcome to it," the hostess said. "But Captain, don't be too hard on them."

Picard grunted, excused himself from the very bewildered Dr. Dumont, then pointed specifically to the three intruders, who'd been busily stuffing their pockets with what was left of the food.

"You," he ordered. "Come."

The three men watched him march toward the door, and shared a rather bemused look.

Come, Rusty mouthed silently, as if testing out the texture of the word. Come… Come…

Ravelli joined in, rolling his tongue at the beginning of the word.

"Come. Rrrum."

"Brumm bum bum!" Hackenbush hummed along as the three of them lifted their knees in a military-style step.

Rusty raised his hands as if holding an imaginary fife and began to whistle an ancient Revolutionary War march. Ravelli added an imaginary drum and Hackenbush reached over to the buffet, dabbing a napkin with ketchup and draping it over his forehead like an old style bandage. Like that, the three of them marched after the officers, exiting the room to the sound of the crowd's applause.

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

References include: TNG Home Soil; pretty much all the Marx Brothers' movies; the song Dr. Hackenbush (which was deleted from A Day At The Races, but Groucho liked to sing it at parties anyway); Harpo's appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show when he played Turkey in the Straw on a teensy tiny harmonica; that poem about Lincoln by Walt Whitman (O Captain! My Captain!); and the 1906 Billy Murray song, Waltz Me Around Again Willie.

Until next time, thanks so much for reading! I hope you're enjoying my story!
Chapter Eighteen

Danny stood just inside the door to Guinan's office, observing closely as three holographic representations of the Marx Brothers paraded into the room to the improvised tune of an ancient military march.

If Danny had still been human, rather than an android, he suspected he'd be holding his breath, waiting to see if the Marxes' molecules would start losing cohesion the instant the three characters stepped beyond the range of Ten Forward's holographic gaming tables.

It's what should have happened. If Barclay was right, and the Ihat consciousness had tampered with the holodeck to divert a custom program to run in Ten Forward, the three holographic characters should have started to vanish the instant they crossed the office threshold.

But they didn't. Instead, Harpo (Rusty), Chico (Ravelli), and Groucho (Dr. Hackenbush) trooped right in to the softly lit room and continued their upbeat march around the small table Guinan kept for conferences with her staff — much to Picard's, and Worf's, irritation.

Something flickered in the back of Danny's mind, something he might have called a thrill of excitement if he hadn't felt so oddly abstracted. It was becoming clear that these characters were more than mere holograms. Could that mean their antics and personas were more than simple programming?

"Intriguing..." Danny muttered to himself, his mind racing with questions and possibilities as he perused his tricorder's high-speed readouts.

"Danny, those Marx holograms are still here," Geordi observed, lagging — as usual — several million beats behind the android. "But, that's impossible. If their images were being projected by the holo-emitters in Ten Forward, shouldn't they—"

"Yes," Danny acknowledged, but Geordi heard a brusque presumption in his tone, as if the android were saying 'been there, done that, already moved on without you.'

It might have been his imagination. He hoped it was. But, Danny had been cutting him off a lot since his transformation, and Geordi was starting to find it really grating. As a human Danny had been bright — intimidatingly bright, if Geordi was to be completely honest — but he'd also been shy, anxious, and eager to feel useful.

Now, though...

Was it really Danny irritating him, or the fact that he was a human in android's clothing — a smart guy suddenly gifted with Data's superhuman abilities?

Geordi knew an android's brain operated at a much faster speed than a human's, but at least Data had been polite enough to let his human co-workers get their thoughts out before he added his two cents. Danny seemed to lack that touch of social sensitivity, a fact that made Geordi wonder if Data's characteristic politeness had been more than a pre-programmed aspect of his modesty program. Perhaps, instead, it had been something the android had learned through long experience brushing
against human tempers…and egos.

Including Geordi's own…

"All right, then," the engineer said tightly. "Any theories as to why those zany holograms haven't disappeared?"

"Yes," Danny repeated, unaware of his companion's inner discourse. His analysis complete for the moment, he snapped his tricorder shut and tucked it back in its holster. "They are not true holograms."

Geordi's eyebrows rose above his VISOR.

"Care to explain that one?"

"I would be happy to discuss the details of my theory, but later," Danny said, his attention more on the activity around the table than his conversation with Geordi. "I want to watch this. One does not often have the opportunity to meet one's heroes – particularly when several centuries separate your lifespan from theirs."

"Wait, then you think these…men… That they're some kind of reincarnation…"

"No, I do not believe Ihat capable of resurrecting the actual Marx Brothers comedy team. I do, however, believe that this is the closest I will ever get to interacting with that team. Excuse me."

The impromptu parade had come to an end and Picard was desperately trying to call order.

"If everyone would please take their seats—"

"Uh, where-a should you want me to take 'em, boss?" Ravelli said, half-lifting one of Guinan's comfortable rolling chairs.

Hackenbush gave an exasperated groan and ducked in front of Riker to secure the seat next to the captain. Indicating Ravelli, he said, "There's my argument, Cap. Restrict immigration."

"Please," Picard said through his teeth, sinking slowly into the chair at the head of the table. "I really will stand for no more of this nonsen—"

A loud honk blared beneath him and he jumped to his feet.

"What the devil!"

The gathered officers stood to see Rusty lounging in Picard's chair with his horn on his lap, and a particularly impish grin creasing his face.

"Looks like you won't sit for it either," Hackenbush quipped.

Deanna rolled her eyes at him and he said, "What? You can't expect all the jokes to be good."

Rusty slid off Picard's chair, under the table, and up into the chair between Ravelli and Riker, where the redhead's fixed, unblinking stare sent the executive officer leaning deeply into Worf's personal space. Worf growled, but Rusty leaned forward until he was literally standing on his head in Riker's lap, his knees swaying in front of the flabbergasted first officer's face.

"Oh my-!" Deanna exclaimed, half out of her chair and reaching over the table to catch the redhead's legs. But, Ravelli got to him first and pulled him down into his chair, rather roughly.
"What's-a matter, you act-a like this?" he scolded. "You wanna the lady should like you, yes?"

Rusty nodded eagerly.

"Then why for-a you put-a your legs up over your head? When you meet a nice gal, she-a no wanna talk-a to your feet! She-a wanna talk-a to your face!"

Rusty nodded again, then shook him off and draped his legs over Riker's lap, grinning broadly into the curvy brunette's face in a way that made the seasoned officer shiver.

Riker pushed Rusty's legs away, but Rusty put them right back in Riker's lap, his grin turning playful, as if this all was a game Riker was taking far too seriously.

"No," Riker said, and pushed Rusty's legs off again. "I want you to stop this."

Rusty replaced his legs. Riker pushed them off. Rusty put them back, and Riker shoved Rusty's legs so hard, he sent the redhead spinning into his brother's chair.

Rusty didn't miss a beat. He draped his leg over his brother's lap. Ravelli pushed him off with a mouthful of muttered Italian, so Rusty did it again, and again until Ravelli scissored Rusty's wayward leg securely between his own.

Not to be outdone, Rusty draped his remaining leg over Ravelli's. When Ravelli held it down with his arm, Rusty countered with his arm, which Ravelli countered with his other arm and Rusty countered with his other arm until the pair of them were a tightly woven tangle of arms and legs.

Data stared at this contorted display in utter bewilderment, but Danny – to everyone's surprise – burst out laughing, followed by an explosive, though self-conscious, chortle from Deanna, who turned bright red trying to swallow back her amusement.

"Hm! Interesting," Danny commented, scanning himself with his tricorder.

"But…but…" Data putted, looking childishly dismayed. "But…"

"I once knew a girl who sounded like you," Hackenbush said.

"Oh?"

"Yeah," Hackenbush told him. "She took a job as an outboard motor and I never saw her again." He glanced at Picard. "I haven't used that joke in years. Now you know why."

Riker groaned. Deanna and Danny broke into giggles, but Data blinked in befuddlement.

"I do not understand. How could she possibly...?"

"It's not important, Data," Deanna tried to calm him, still struggling to recover her dignity.

"Yes, it is," Data protested. "I'm human now. Yet, I did not laugh, and he did." He looked pointedly at Danny. "I do not believe that to be fair!"

"There was no reason to laugh. They are not funny," Worf grunted, glaring at the three Marxes as if he'd like nothing more than to lock them in the brig and tear out the forcefield release controls.

"Data, Worf, please," Picard said, sounding like his rope had frayed to its last thread. "This is not the time—"
"Then, when is the time?" Data countered, bubbling over with genuine agitation and clearly unsure how to handle it. "For all any of us know, this may be my only opportunity to experience humor as a human would. I may be an android again tomorrow – or before the evening ends!"

"Data, I know how you're feeling—" Deanna started.

"Do you?" Data exclaimed, distress making his voice come out about an octave higher than usual. "Do you know how very frightened I am that I am somehow missing or misusing a singular opportunity I will never have again?"

"Yes," Deanna said gently. "I do."

"Oh," Data said, and he lowered his blue eyes to his folded hands. "Then I apologize for my outburst."

"There is no need, Data," Picard said gruffly. "We are all finding these transformations…trying. But, now things seem to have settled a bit, perhaps we might finally get to the business at hand."

All eyes turned to Rusty and Ravelli who, having untangled themselves from themselves, were now engaged in a very physical game of War that involved much table banging and slapping of cards.

"Disrespectful, impertinent, juvenile…" Worf growled deep in his throat, adding other, far less complimentary descriptors of the two men as his voice got lower, his hands picking at his uniform's hem.

Deanna had to press a hand to her mouth to stifle her giggles.

"Ah, ignore them," Hackenbush said, and turned to Picard. "We've got far more important things to discuss. For instance, you didn't tell me out there, Captain – are you married? Would you like to be? 'Cause I know a certain someone who could really go for a hot little dish like you."

He grinned up at the captain and suggestively waggled his painted eyebrows. But, even as he scooted closer to Picard, he fixed a coy little smile on the much younger Riker, to whom he waved and blew little kisses from behind the captain's back.

Riker wrinkled his nose.

Picard buried his face in his hands.

"Captain, if I may...?" Danny spoke up.

"What is it, Commander," Picard said wearily.

"Yes, what is it Commander?" Hackenbush parroted, and leaned his chin over Picard's slender shoulder, all wide-eyed attention. The captain shoved him back into his own chair with a shrug.

"Oh, get off."

Undeterred, the mustached man snuggled up to Riker, who pushed him over to Worf. One look at Worf's bared fangs, though, and the little man jumped up from his seat and loped over to join his brothers in their card game, now and then poking his head up from their little huddle to cast wary glances at the irate Klingon.

"Sir," Danny said, "Commander La Forge and I have been taking detailed readings of these three individuals, and I do not believe their appearance here to be random. In fact, I believe these persons
were chosen deliberately, and for a specific reason, by Ihat himself. In fact, despite a few minor discrepancies, possibly due to translation through the holodeck systems, they seem to be host to the same kind of highly organized energy the computer detected when Ihat first appeared on the bridge."

"The giver just keeps on giving," Riker said dryly.

"I suspect they carry a message, sir," Danny went on. "Or, perhaps, that they are the message."

"Any idea what that message might be?" Geordi asked.

"I am not yet certain, but I would like permission to test a theory."

Picard gestured his approval and leaned back in his chair, keeping his eyes carefully averted from Hackenbush's leering gaze.

Danny straightened, and fixed his golden eyes on each of the Marxes in turn.

"I would like to request that you join me for a concert, to be performed at the reception once this meeting is concluded," he announced.

"A concert!" Deanna exclaimed.

"What do they play, musical chairs?" Riker sniped.

Rusty stuck his lip out at the executive officer, and whistled his acceptance of Danny's challenge, strumming his fingers through the air as if playing an imaginary harp.

Ravelli jumped to his feet.

"That's it! He touches a harp just-a once, and I'm-a gonna do my piano number!"

"I'm all for good music – which is why I want no part of this," Hackenbush said, and loped toward the door. "If you want me, I'll be under the buffet table stuffing my ears with cotton. Any of you ladies care to join me?"

A collective groan sounded from the gathered officers…save for Deanna's husky giggle.

Rusty made a dismissive gesture toward Hackenbush and slid over the table like a seal to stand beside Danny. Ravelli took the longer way around.

Geordi looked uncomfortable.

"Seriously, Danny, what exactly are we in for here?" he said, giving the oddly dressed pair a wary look. "That mini harmonica trick was cute, but a concert…?"

Danny looked startled, a look that grew more pronounced as he realized the other officers seemed to share Geordi's apprehension.

"Then, you do not know…?"

"Know what?" Riker asked.

"Are none of you familiar with the Marx Brothers' work? Their stage work, movies, radio performances, television appearances, musical recordings and compositions, artwork, essays and autobiographies?"
"I've heard of the Marx Brothers, of course," Picard said stiffly. "They were icons of early twentieth century American comedy, among a host of others. Laurel and Hardy, W.C. Fields, Burns and Allen, Buster Keaton, Danny Kaye, Abbott and Costello, Chaplin, the Three Stooges... I could go on. But as for watching their films, I'm afraid their era is a bit far removed from our present."

"More so than Dixon Hill?" Danny asked. "Or Sherlock Holmes?"

"Come on, Danny, we're Starfleet Officers, not a group of cultural historians," Geordi said. "I never heard of Dixon Hill before I came here, and I was barely familiar with Sherlock Holmes. I guess the same goes for the Marx Brothers."

Riker and Worf agreed. Only Deanna sat straighter in her chair.

"Well, I know I've seen one of their pictures," she said. "When I was very small, my father delighted in sharing stories of the Ancient West with me. One of his favorites was a comedy about three men who went West in search of gold, and ended up getting involved in a big railroad swindle. I remember, one of them played a piano with an orange, and another turned an Indian loom into a harp. My father and I watched that movie over and over, and every time we would wait for those two special scenes: Chico Marx shooting the piano keys with his finger, and Harpo Marx bringing a little bit of harmony to a movie full of crazy scenes with his lyrical harp."

Rusty and Ravelli smiled at the compliments, and graced the counselor with a polite bow.

"Now, there's a man who knows real talent," Ravelli told his brother.

Hackenbush crossed his arms.

"Hey, you left out my numbers," he protested. "I yodeled a couple of half-decent ditties in that picture. You can't blame me if you picture-goers grew out of your cowboy phase on your way to outer space."

"I suppose that's true," Deanna said. "But I've always felt those piano and harp solos were timeless."

"Well, if they really are that good…" Riker said warily.

"Are they good?" Hackenbush scoffed, still stinging a bit. "Are roses red? Are cauliflowers purple? Come on, let's get going before the playing starts."

Ravelli strode up to Hackenbush until they were standing practically nose to nose.

"Purple cauliflowers, eh? We'll show you," he said. "Come on, Rusty. We'll give these crazy spaceship people a concert they'll never forget."

As the officers filed out of Guinan's office after the three brothers, still pretty much in the dark and not entirely hopeful that any real answers would be forthcoming any time soon, Data paused by Danny's side, his brow creased.

"Is something wrong?" Danny asked him.

"You're smiling," Data said.

Danny reached up and felt his face.

"I suppose I am. Curious."

"What is? That you have a better grasp of humor in android form than I do as a human?"
Danny shook his head.

"Data, do not be bitter," he said. "As you may have observed from your friends' various reactions to the Marx Brothers' antics, humor is very much a matter of individual taste. The gags Deanna and I found so amusing, Riker and Geordi found annoying, and Worf and the Captain found genuinely irritating. You must learn what strikes you as funny. Some people know right away. Others, like me, must spend years watching, listening, studying, and overanalyzing until the revelation comes. But with so many friends around you, supporting your efforts, I suspect you will have a much easier time than I did. Guinan in particular could provide you with valuable insight."

"Yes. Guinan has been helpful," Data acknowledged, but he still seemed a little sulky.

Danny clasped his counterpart's shoulder.

"Come," he said. "You must play the violin in our concert."

Data's blue eyes widened.

"What—me? The violin? Like this? But…but I haven't practiced… What if I can't—"

"As my mother used to say, 'Your fingers will remember.' Do not worry. I will be playing too."

"The violin?" Data asked, confused.

"No. The cello," Danny said, a slight smile creasing his thin mouth, as if responding to a private joke. "Now, we should get out there. Are you with me?"

Data looked positively stricken.

"I did not expect I would be asked to perform in public," he said. "Not in front of…of Nora. Oh, I… I believe I am feeling…anxiety… Yes, this is definitely anxiety. Also, panic…worry…fear… Nausea…"

"It is called 'stage fright,'" Danny said.

"Is this what it means! It is very unpleasant. Very, very distressing…"

"And very, very normal," Danny assured him. "But you will feel better once you grasp the violin in your hands."

"No. No, I don't think I will…"

"Data," Danny said. "Remember when you said you were afraid of missing or misusing your one opportunity to truly experience the human condition?"

"Yes," Data said, and swallowed, his heart pounding like a hammer in his chest.

"You are familiar with the Marx Brothers' music, are you not?"

"I believe I was. Once. But everything has become so hazy…"

"Then trust me," Danny said, catching and holding his counterpart's eyes with his own. "If you miss this opportunity to play with them, here and now, you will regret it for the rest of your life, whether you spend it as a human or as an android."

Data nodded slowly, shaded, half-accessed memories filtering into his conscious mind as he fought
to recall the music of the Marx Brothers. Once scene in particular began to coalesce behind his eyes – Harpo in an elegant powdered wig playing a light, classical piece between two framed mirrors. Before long, Harpo's mirrored reflections took on lives and personas of their own, switching out their harps for a violin and a cello while Harpo shifted to a faster, jazzier version of the tune on his harp. In his mind's eye, Data saw himself and Danny taking the place of those two mirror images, losing themselves in the sheer delight of the challenging, energetic performance.

"Yes…" he said distantly. "Yes, I think you're right. This is an opportunity I shouldn't miss."

Data's eyes flicked back into focus, and he beamed at Danny.

"Thank you, Danny. I feel much better now. In fact, I am beginning to believe this may in fact be an enjoyable experience!"

Danny grinned, and he nearly laughed out loud. Something in his android brain had changed; something deep and fundamental, triggered by that first burst of laughter he'd experienced just minutes ago. Danny needed time to explore what he'd learned, to follow the paths that laughter had opened and put the incoming floods of new information to proper use - particularly as it potentially related to that mysterious 'emotion' chip Data's father had designed for him. One thing Danny did know, though. That's plan was becoming clearer to him by the moment.

Still, all that could wait at least until ship's night, when everyone went to bed. Right now, Danny had to go play the cello in the company of three of the finest, most fascinating musicians he'd ever have the privilege of knowing: Harpo, Chico, and Data himself.

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

References include the Marx Brothers' Go West, Animal Crackers, a deleted scene from Horse Feathers in which Harpo did a headstand in the 'college widow's' lap, the fantastic mirror scene in The Big Store, pretty much everything else the Marx Brothers ever did, page 72 of Joe Adamson's Groucho, Harpo, Chico, and Sometimes Zeppo, the movie First Contact and TNG: A Fistful of Datas; Inheritance.

Next time: Dr. Crusher arrives on the scene, as well as some more uninvited guests. Stay Tuned! :)}
Chapter Nineteen

Dr. Crusher adjusted the hem of her claret-colored dress and stepped out of the turbolift…late to the party, as usual. But, such was the life of a busy chief medical officer. There was always research to work on, reports to write out, charts to sign, evaluations to complete, staff to supervise, patients to comfort. Still, she'd promised Data she'd make an appearance at the reception…and nothing short of universal cataclysm was going to keep her from seeing Jean-Luc in his dress uniform...

Crusher entered Ten Forward to a deafening roar of applause, cheers, and whistles – none of it for her, of course, though it would have been nice. She followed the crowd's gaze to the far corner of the packed room, where a triangular space housed one of the most unusual groups she had ever seen.

In the center of the space, Data and Danny, the human android and the android human, wore mirror-double grins as they bowed to the crowd. Danny had his hand on the neck of an elegant cello, while Data cradled his beloved violin. Between them, a little man in a top hat, red wig, and threadbare raincoat stood proudly beside a golden pedal harp, enthusiastically showing his appreciation with whistles and happy gestures. Another man, this one dressed sort of like Pinocchio in a green jacket and softly pointed green hat, grinned from the bench of a shiny black grand piano. The oddly dressed pair struck her as familiar, but she couldn't seem to place them.

As the performers gestured for the crowd to settle down, Dr. Crusher picked her way over to Picard's table, hoping to take him by surprise.

"So, what did I miss?" she asked, slipping into an empty chair. She would have said more, but a dark haired man with a greasepaint mustache was leering at her over an unlit cigar.

"Let me guess," she said, deciding to play along. "Groucho Marx, I presume. Oh, I see - then, those two characters up there with Danny and Data must be your brothers, Harpo and Chico!" She looked accusingly at Picard. "Jean-Luc, you didn't tell me this was supposed to be a costume party!"

"It is not," Picard said stiffly. "Dr. Crusher, may I introduce—"

"'Doctor' Crusher, is it?" the mustached man interrupted. "Such a treat to meet a fellow medical professional! And not a bad looking dish at that."

He looked her up and down, then waggled his eyebrows.

"The name's Hackenbush: Dr. Hugo Z. Hackenbush. Didn't we meet at a conference last summer? You were the one with the lampshade on your head."

Picard pinched his nose.

"Or maybe that was me," Hackenbush went on, but his eyes were aimed at the stage. "Ooh, don't tell me they're going to start up again. Excuse me girls, while I duck under the table."

"Now, Hugo..." Dr. Dumont admonished, but the strange man had already disappeared. "Whatever is the matter with that man!"
"Would you like a list?" Picard muttered.

"I thought he was pretty good," Dr. Crusher said, but before she could make any inquiries regarding who he really was and why he was there, he showed up across the room, striding right into the middle of the impromptu "stage" and plunking himself down in Danny's chair.

Danny and Data had moved over to the side of the piano, while the redhead paced absently around in the background, as if looking for something.

"Now we'll-a try a new piece," the man dressed like Pinocchio was saying. "Can-a you-a play a high C?"

Data brought his violin to his chin and played a sweet, trilling note. The crowd applauded, and Data broke into a delighted smile.

"Eh." Ravelli shrugged. "Sounds more like-a vitamin D to me, but we'll-a give it a shot. How's about we play the 'Beer Barrel Polka'?"

"But…we don't have any sheet music," Data protested.

"That is all right," Danny said. "He will play the melody, and we can noodle around with our cello and violin."

"That's-a good idea," Ravelli said, "You-a noodle on those, I'll-a macaroni on this."

The crowd laughed, and Ravelli launched into a song that sounded a lot more like 'I'm Daffy Over You' than the 'Beer Barrel Polka.' Danny and Data shared a questioning look, but went along with it on their strings.

"This is great," Dr. Crusher said. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you had the real Marx Brothers up there."

"You're not far off," Picard told her.

She cocked an eyebrow.

"I don't quite follow."

Picard sighed.

"They're holograms. Or, something very close to it. Another one of Ihat's little jokes, I'm afraid," he said.

Crusher's eyes widened.

"But...why the Marx Brothers?"

"Commander Soong claims to have a theory," the captain said wearily. "Perhaps he'll see fit to enlighten us after the performance."

This left Crusher's curiosity far from satisfied, but a look at the captain's face told her now was not the time to press further. Instead, she reached out and gave Picard's hand a supportive pat before turning her attention back to the performance.

After listening to several repetitions of the same brief melody, Hackenbush heaved a world weary sigh.
"I was afraid of this," the mustached man called out over the music. "Hey, why don't you play the one about the nearsighted podiatrist?"

"What's it called?" Danny asked.

"'Mah Feet Is In Your Hands,'" Hackenbush quipped, pronouncing 'feet' like 'fate'.

"It's a no good," Ravelli said and stopped playing, leaving Danny and Data hanging in mid-beat with their bows in the air.

"What's wrong?" Data asked.

"I can't-a think-a the finish," Ravelli told him.

"I've got a suggestion," the mustached man called out.

"Well, there's a box in the corner," Ravelli told him. "Why don't you stuff it."

"A fine way to talk to a patron," Hackenbush sniffed. "I want to hear 'Somewhere My Love Lies Sleeping,' with a male chorus."

"A male chorus, eh? Hows about I play you one better," Ravelli said, and started in on 'I'm Daffy Over You' again. Danny and Data enthusiastically joined in.

Hackenbush groaned and writhed in agony – then sat up, his ears pricked and on the alert. A metallic clanging noise was sounding from behind the piano. The mustached man got up to investigate, just in time to meet Rusty, banging two cymbals together as he circled the piano. The redhead clanged out a regular beat and marched in time with it, as insistent as a ticking clock.

Hackenbush got in line behind him, taking off his black overcoat and tying its arms around his waist, like an apron. Without missing a beat, Ravelli, Danny, and Data shifted to a rousing rendition of 'The Anvil Chorus.' As the marchers marched and the cymbals clanged and the piano played, Danny and Data got carried away, entwining their elaborate harmonies with the effortless delicacy only a pair of ace virtuosos can achieve.

Ravelli stopped the music with a clash of keys just as Rusty disappeared behind the piano.

"Hey, you guys," he said. "I don't-a mind you noodling around but, please, don't-a play better than me."

Dr. Crusher laughed, and even Picard cracked a smile.

Danny and Data (who was having a very hard time containing his own giggles) bowed out and joined Hackenbush in their seats while the spotlight turned to Ravelli and his unique rendition of the 'Beer Barrel Polka.' As Crusher watched, wide-eyed, the pianist launched into one of the most amazing musical performances she had ever seen. Ravelli's fingers literally danced up and down the keyboard, now pointing, now flicking, now cartwheeling. He shot keys with his finger, skidded out graceful glissandos, shared funny faces with Hackenbush, Data, and Danny, and never missed a note. When it was over, the whole place was on its feet, laughing and clapping and calling for more.

"Jean-Luc, he's incredible," Dr. Crusher said.

"I agree," Dr. Dumont said, beaming. "I'm having a marvelous time!"

"I saw Chico Marx and his orchestra ages ago," Guinan said, her eyes fixed on Picard. "If these men
are holograms, they are eerily close to the originals."

"That did spend several weeks in Data's head before infiltrating the ship's systems," Picard said grimly. "He could have picked up any amount of information in that time...about us, our culture, our history..."

Dr. Crusher shivered at that thought but, before she could comment, Rusty reappeared to a fresh swell of applause. Looking a little lost, the redhead shuffled over to the golden harp at the center of the "stage" and circled it curiously, as if trying to figure out just what the big thing was for. He tapped it with his foot, turned it from side to side, then latched onto the strings and pulled faces like a wild animal trapped in a cage – much to the delight of his audience.

He backed away thoughtfully and cupped his chin in his hand, then snapped his fingers and pulled a long arrow out of an inside pocket. With deliberate movements, he fitted the arrow into the longest harp string, took careful aim, and pulled it back like an archer's bow. The arrow hit its mark dead on – sticking to the center of Danny's pale forehead. Danny detached the little red plunger and shot a long-suffering look at the audience, who roared and cheered.

Once the laughter quieted, the little man sat down and pulled the harp up against his shoulder. He pushed up his baggy sleeves, tilted his head, and pouted his lip. After a moment of complete silence, he brightened, nodded eagerly to his audience, and began to play.

If Chico's style was to play to his audience, Harpo's was to draw them in, enveloping them in his own special kind of attentive silence. Not a breath was heard as Harpo plucked the strings of his golden harp. He poured his entire focus into his playing; the silent comedian who sang through his music.

Dr. Crusher couldn't remember the name of the piece he played, but she knew it had to be Mozart. She had never been as interested in classical music as Picard or Data – she preferred a tune she could dance to – yet she found herself enraptured by the artist's singular technique, so earnest, yet so playful. Like Chico's routine on the piano, this was something she had never seen before: a dazzling performance from an era so distant as to be almost alien.

As the audience watched his fingers, Harpo shifted his playing style, upping the tempo and giving the tune a little swing. Data and Danny took that as a cue, grabbing their instruments and taking a place at either side of Harpo and his harp. The solo was now a trio: a rollicking, jazzy take on a classical theme that had the crowd tapping their toes and clapping their hands.

The performance held everyone's full attention. Even Guinan didn't notice the room's double doors slide open, or the stocky, white-haired admiral who strode irritably through them. Nor, did she notice the tall figure with the red feathered tail materialize just behind the admiral, rubbing his pale hands together in mischievous glee. All she saw was Data's smile; the smile of a man transported by the joy of music...and the glow of admiration shining in Nora Maskelyne's eyes…

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

References include: "Animal Crackers," "Day at the Races," "At the Circus," "The Big Store," and "Love Happy." Chico was known for playing a fast-paced little tune sometimes referred to as 'Chico's Theme' or 'The Chico Motif.' By 1933, Chico had
adapted it into at least two separate songs, which he published as: 'I'm Daffy Over You' and 'Lucky Little Penny'. It sounds very similar to a much later 1958 song sung by the McGuire Sisters called 'Sugartime' and the tunes are often confused.
Chapter Twenty

The admiral's mind was full of dark thoughts as he marched into the crowded reception Picard was holding for the research scientists. Some kind of musical concert was going on, but Haftel barely noticed. The last time he'd been on this ship...in the Ten Forward Lounge...he'd come to observe Data's constructed "offspring," Lal. More than observe – he'd come to claim the fledgling android in the name of advancing Starfleet research and preserving the safety of Federation citizens.

Haftel had been concerned about what Data's invention represented, and he hadn't been alone. Just the idea of one machine constructing another in its own image in such a spontaneous, secretive way...

The implications of Data's actions, of Lal's unregulated, wholly unauthorized construction, had deeply disturbed Starfleet Command, while the prospect of her continued development outside the controlled conditions of a Federation laboratory had greatly alarmed Haftel and his colleagues at the Daystrom Institute.

The first thing Haftel always taught his new researchers and research students was to never work alone, without a partner or a group. The image of the "lone genius" conducting his experiments in isolation may be romantic, but in practice it was dangerous for a scientist to work alone and there were plenty of warning examples to prove it – one of the most infamous being that of the Institute's own namesake, Dr. Richard Daystrom, and the disastrous test run of his M-5 computer.

A sophisticated (for the time) multitronic unit modeled after the human brain and programmed with Daystrom's own personality engrams, the M-5 had been installed in the Constitution class Enterprise commanded by Captain James T. Kirk with the aim of overseeing several battle simulations. But, what no one knew was that Dr. Daystrom had become unstable, his ambition to prove himself to be more than an aging wunderkind blinding him to the fact that he had transferred his own obsessive drive to preserve his legacy to his creation. Several hundred Starfleet officers had perished as a result of M-5's (and its creator's) "malfunction." Two starships, wiped out, while the Enterprise crew became prisoners of their own vessel, helpless to intervene.

And, was the example set by Dr. Soong any better? Hadn't his prototype, Lore, conspired to destroy an entire colony, not to mention the crew of the Enterprise-D? Data, himself, had repeatedly demonstrated the threat posed when an android malfunctioned, or was caused to malfunction by an outside agent. Haftel shuddered to think of the ease with which Data had sealed off the bridge and commandeered the Enterprise when his ailing "father" had activated that homing beacon, planted so deeply in Data's brain even the android had not been aware of it. And the way Lore had manipulated a carrier wave to deactivate Data's ethics program and flood him with hostile emotions...

There was more than enough evidence to prove that, when it came to replicating something as advanced as a positronic brain – especially a positronic brain housed in a durable humanoid frame boasting the strength of at least ten men – if something went wrong, be it in the confines of a starship or on any inhabited planet, the consequences could be devastating. That was why Haftel so firmly believed that group work and expert peer observation was so crucial, not only to the advancement of science and technology, but for the safety of the Federation.
Now, Haftel had returned to the Enterprise to deal with another machine threat: a rogue electronic consciousness with an ability to manipulate matter and energy seemingly on par with the frustratingly enigmatic Q.

Picard, predictably enough, was taking a sentimental approach to this Ihat menace – much has he had with that young Borg captive, Hugh, and with Data and Lal themselves. Haftel remembered all too well how Picard and his crew had anthropomorphized his android officer's relationship with his constructed "daughter," characterizing the pair as a "family."

In Haftel's view, Picard always had been too close to his second officer to view him, his abilities, and his potential objectively. By Data's own admission, he had no human emotions. Haftel knew, better than most, an android's existence consisted of series after series of rational choices governed by elaborate programming designed to mimic human responses: a or b, yes or no, coffee or tea, bluff, bet or call. For all Picard's protests, Haftel had seen for himself that, once under direct orders to deliver his invention into the hands of Starfleet research, Data's programmed rationality would have led him to hand her over. Only his captain's counter-command…followed so shortly by Lal's fatal systems crash…had stopped him.

Haftel still felt he had been fully justified in his actions and his approach to Data's creation. Perhaps he had come too early, tried to remove the fledgling from the nest before it was ready to fly, but better too early than too late. Better to identify the flaws and weaknesses in her construction before the new android could become a threat to herself or others…like her "uncle," Lore.

No, Haftel did not regret what he had done, or what he'd said. If anything, he wished he'd argued his case more strongly, forced Picard to look past sentiment and see those androids for what they were: powerful tools; masterful examples of human brilliance; all wrapped up in the disturbingly delicate, potentially dangerous, unpredictably radical designs of that rogue, antisocial madman, Noonian Soong.

Why, then, after all this time, did the prospect of returning to this ship, to this room, make him feel so…uncomfortable…

"You're not supposed to be here. Not yet."

"Excuse me?"

Shaking himself free of his musings, the admiral straightened and turned a glare on the owner of that snide voice. It was just like one of Picard's people to address a Starfleet admiral so disre..spect..fully…

The admiral's eyes widened, and his thoughts stuttered to a startled gasp.

"Ihat?"

The being made a sweeping bow, his crimson tail fanning dramatically above him before he straightened back to his full, impressive height. The sight of his lizard-green eyes and saurian smile made the admiral swallow reflexively.

"Admiral Haftel," the being said coldly. "You've come too soon. Go back to your ship and wait there until morning. I'll let you know when to return."

Held in the thrall of that raptor-like stare, the admiral almost complied. Almost. But, Starfleet officers do not wilt so easily. Even faced with the unpredictable whims of a powerful being like Ihat…

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Data never wanted the performance to end. He had never imagined a high like this; the heady blend of excitement and adrenaline, joy and pride, and something else, some indefinable glow that lit his heart and warmed his face whenever Nora smiled up at him…

Something was happening deep inside him, something strong and wonderful. He poured that feeling into his music, letting it travel through his muscles, feeding the dance of his fingers on the strings, the graceful sweeps of his bow. He was so wrapped up in the experience, he didn't hear the commotion start at the back of the room, or notice the audience's attention waver and break. He didn't see Harpo and his brothers leave the stage and vanish into the crowd, or Danny tap his combadge to alert Barclay – still working in the holodeck – that their quarry had finally appeared.

He just kept playing, and playing, until Danny took him by the arm.

Data gasped, horrified to feel his perfect moment splinter and fade.

"No!" he exclaimed. "No, no—oh, it's gone! That wonderful, wonderful feeling – you ruined it!" He glared at Danny, his blue eyes filling with tears. "Why did you ruin it! What if it never comes back?"

"I understand how you feel, but you must not cry, Data. Not here," Danny said.

"I do not wish to cry," Data sniffled, wiping his eyes on his sleeve. "But it isn't fair! I was having such a good time. What happened?"

"I shall tell you, if you stop crying," Danny said, the look on Data's face provoking his positronic brain to suddenly replay his memories of all Lal's tantrums. He shook his head to clear it, but it did no good. Android memories did not ebb, flow, and fade like human thoughts. They had to be sorted and filed before they'd leave him alone.

"Only children cry when their fun is interrupted," he said. "Adults have the perspective to understand good times will come again."

"Most adults presume they will retain emotional awareness throughout their lives," Data sulked. "I do not have that luxury."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not," Danny said. "But I need you to concentrate now. Admiral Haftel has arrived early, and Ihat has just reappeared."

"Oh…" Data said, marveling at the peculiar tingle in his mind as he felt the 'light dawning through the gloom.' But even that intriguing feeling couldn't last. "That is not good," he said, struggling to peer over the crowd to the source of the commotion at the back.

Worf and his security team had surrounded Ihat and the incensed admiral, with Picard, Riker, Troi, Geordi, Dr. Crusher, and Guinan standing just outside the ring, but the volatility of the situation was clear.

Another unfamiliar feeling gripped the former android at the sight of Ihat's grinning face, and Data suddenly felt very small and vulnerable, like a snail whose protective shell had been lifted away, and now hung far out of his reach.

"What should we do?"

"I have contacted Mr. Barclay, and he is nearly ready to launch our 'trap,'" Danny said. "You and Nora must join him on the holodeck to back him up should something go wrong, or Ihat attempt escape."
"Understood," Data said. "But…"

"Yes?" Danny asked.

"What of the Marx Brothers? Where have they gone?"

"Last I saw of them, they had joined the crowd. Go on, now, find Nora and leave through Guinan's office. I will do what I can here while we wait for Mr. Barclay's signal."

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"I am the Constructor here, and I say the clay is not yet ready for molding," Ihat said, advancing menacingly on the admiral. "If you will not leave, you must not interfere with my plans."

"And just what exactly are your plans?" Haftel retorted, meeting the creature glare for stony glare.

Worf moved forward, but the admiral gestured for the Klingon and his security team to stay back.

"The seeds I have planted will be easily identified, once they have matured enough to bear fruit," Ihat said. "In the meantime, I say 'on with the show!' Let the music continue!"

"Oh, no, this farce ends right here and now," Haftel proclaimed loudly, turning a pointed scowl on Picard and Dr. Dumont. "In fact, this gathering should never have been encouraged in the first place. I want every civilian and scientist in their assigned quarters now, and all ship's crew on yellow alert. This party's over until I start getting some real answers."

Dr. Dumont looked to Picard, who nodded his apology. She sighed and gestured to her people to follow her out of the room.

"It was a marvelous reception, Captain," she said before she left. "Thank you for understanding how much it meant to us, after all that time alone."

Haftel scowled, but Ihat just crossed his arms and stepped back to lean against the wall by the door, his green eyes glowing.

"Oh yeah?" Chico called out from the rapidly diminishing crowd. "And how about us, eh? We-a come-a here to play and what-a happens? You say-a stop-a the music! Why for we-a stop the music if-a the people here, they want to hear us play, eh?"

Beside him, Harpo nodded firmly, and Groucho clapped and whistled.

"Who are these men?" the admiral demanded angrily.

"Who are we?" Groucho said, loping over to stand between Haftel and Ihat. "Well, there's my brother, and my brother's brother, and my brother's brother's brother, which would be me. After all the brother of my brother is my brother, and that makes us all our father's sons. At least, that's what mother tells us."

He nudged the admiral and waggled his eyebrows.

Haftel gaped.

"What's the meaning of all this doubletalk? Has no one on this ship the slightest respect for authority?"

"Authority? What about common manners?" Groucho retorted. "Here you come blustering in,
interrupting our performance and ordering us to leave before we've been properly introduced. We
know who we are, of course, but we've still never heard of you. Unless, you're that new talent scout,
in which case—"

"I am not a talent scout," the admiral snapped. "I—"

"In those pajamas?" He picked at the admiral's uniform. "At this time of night? Surrounded by all
these stars? What else could you be?" Groucho said. "Just wait 'till you hear my impression of
Maurice Chevalier."

"Who?"

The admiral sputtered as Groucho opened his mouth wide and began singing about a nightingale in a
patently false French accent.

"This is ridiculous! Picard, have these men removed to their quarters before— What the hell do you
think you're doing!"

Harpo blinked innocently up at the admiral and smiled. Somehow, when no one was looking, the
little redhead had managed to rest his foot in the admiral's palm, like a footsore traveler taking
advantage of a low stone wall. He'd been standing like that, unnoticed, through most of the admiral's
exchange with Groucho, yawning and making impatient gestures behind the admiral's back.

"What is this nonsense?" Haftel exclaimed, and pushed Harpo away from him. He bumped into
Groucho, who added a little dance step to his song.

"Oh, he-a no mean nothin', mister," Chico said as Harpo quietly hooked his knee over the admiral's
hand and leaned against him as he would against the side of a building. "My brother, he's-a what
they call-a duff an' dum. He-a can't-a help-a bein' like he is."

"Well, tell him to get the hell off me," Haftel said, shoving Harpo away again, right into Worf. Harpo
retorted by pulling a horrible face, his cheeks puffed out and his eyes crossed.

Worf let him go, secretly enjoying the admiral's frustration. He, like the rest of Data's friends, had
never forgiven Haftel for Lal's systems crash.

"Oh, we can't do that, mister," Groucho said, watching with brotherly affection as Harpo
industriously dusted the admiral's head, shoulders and boots with a small broom he'd pulled from his
cavernous pockets, then held his hand out for a tip. The admiral ignored him.

"Why not?"

"'Cause he likes you, see," Chico said. "Our-a brother, he-a don't take a liking to just anyone. Guess
that-a makes you our special friend!"

"Picard!" Haftel roared as the manic trio closed in.

Ihat snickered, rocking on his heels in delight.

Ihat glanced to Danny - who indicated he only needed a few more seconds delay to spring the trap
- then stepped slowly forward.

"Ihat," the captain said in his most reasonable tone, "perhaps now would be the time to—"

A shimmering energy field erupted around Ihat, bending and flexing like a fishnet to bind him more
securely with every move. The Marx Brothers inexplicably vanished, leaving the admiral bewildered, but the trapped alien hissed and glared through the humming bluish glow, his green eyes seeming to burn through the holodeck viewscreen straight into Barclay's brain.

"He can't see me," Barclay assured himself, and glanced over his shoulder at Data and Nora, who had just arrived from Ten Forward to help him with his trap. "He can't see me, right?"

Data shrugged, and squeezed Nora's hand but, before he could return to his work at the control panel, Barclay gasped, his body wracked with hideous, skull-splitting, gut-wrenching pains. He collapsed to the floor, squirming and writhing in agony. Data and Nora rushed to help him, calling to Sickbay for medical assistance while, back in Ten Forward, Worf and three other security officers converged on the imprisoned intruder.

Ihat winked, then turned on his heel, seeming to dissolve right into the energy trap. The shimmering net exploded into blinding fragments, throwing everyone off their feet and actually rocking the ship.

"What the hell—!" the admiral grunted, floundering on his back like a capsized turtle before Picard managed to gain enough equilibrium to help him to his feet.

"Admiral," Picard said as calmly as he could manage, tugging down the hem of his dress uniform. "Allow me to—"

"Meeting. Now. Observation Lounge," the admiral ground out from between clenched teeth, his pale eyes blazing. "All senior staff. I'm putting a stop to this ancient menace, and if I have to destroy the Enterprise to do it, I will."

"Wait," Troi interrupted, her broad forehead creased with concern. "Where's Danny Soong? He was here before Ihat…escaped. Did anyone see him leave?"

"Well, those Marx Brothers vanished when we dropped the net on Ihat. Perhaps he sent Danny away too?" Riker suggested, but Troi shook her head.

"No… No, I have a bad feeling about this. Something's changed."

"Counselor?" Picard prompted.

"Ihat was amused before, but now…" She looked up, her dark eyes wide with worry. "I sense he's become angry with us, Captain. Very angry indeed."

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

References include Monkey Business, Duck Soup; TOS: The Ultimate Computer; TNG: The Offspring, Brothers, Datalore, Descent I-II, The Measure of a Man, I, Borg; and Groucho's song "Father's Day."
Chapter Twenty-One

"You are still here." Danny kept walking, his eyes fixed on the corridor ahead as he spoke. "There is no need to hide. I know you have been following me since I ducked out of Ten Forward. And you can drop the act," the android added as Harpo scampered past him to take the lead. "There are no holoemitters in this corridor. It is clear to me now that your apparent reliance on holographic projection has been nothing more than a decoy, a ploy to distract our attention while you infiltrated the ship's computer. No doubt, by this time, you have infested the Enterprise with your complex polymorphic codes as thoroughly as you did Data, before my purge restored his system. Is that not true, Ihat?"

The little man shot him a coy, knowing smile. Danny frowned.

"Am I to infer from that look that you have not stopped with the Enterprise?"

The redhead made a rolling motion with his hand, indicating he should go further...

Danny's eyes widened.

"Have you infected Haftel's transport ship as well?"

Harpo's wicked smile broadened.

"Shuttles and escape pods? Padds? Personal workstations?"

The little man turned his eyes to the side and whistled a smug little tune.

With preternatural speed, Danny grabbed the shorter man by the collar and lifted him startlingly high off the ground. Harpo snatched his horn from his belt and happily used it to bop Danny's head, chest and shoulders – honk, honk, honk, honk!

Danny was unphased. Failing to crack a smile out of him, or get a response of any kind, the little man replaced his horn and just dangled, giving Danny a sulky look.

"Listen closely, Ihat," the android said, his golden eyes glacially cold. "You are going to drop character and talk to me, or I am going to carry you upside down like a sack of grain until I have finished my work. In this form, I do not need both arms to operate more quickly and efficiently than any organic being on this ship and, as much as I admire the Marx Brothers, I am no longer in the mood to indulge you in this game."

The little man cupped his chin in his hand and scrunched up his face in thought, paying absolutely no heed to his awkward predicament. After a moment, he brightened, held up a staying finger, and twisted out of his threadbare coat so smoothly and quickly it took Danny a moment to follow him into the empty guest quarters to their right.

Once inside, he had to stop and blink a few times to get his bearings. In no more than that brief instant, the time it took to step through a sliding door, Ihat had transformed what had been standard guest quarters into what appeared to be the crowded backstage passage of a bustling Earth-style
theater. At the far end, a fire exit with a battered 'No Smoking' sign had been propped open with a shoe, letting in wisps and curls of tobacco smoke along with the nighttime breeze. The acrid, musty smells of tobacco, sweat, greasepaint, and old wood tainted the stuffy air, and loud New York-accented chatter rippled up and down the hall. Dim, yellow light indicated an open door not far ahead, probably a dressing room. But, Danny had to maneuver past several irritable stage hands with unlit cigar stubs clenched between their teeth and a veritable flock of scantily clad chorus girls before he could get there.

Inside the dressing room, a man's voice sang ebulliently:

Went fishing last Sunday and I caught a smelt
Put him in the pan and the fire he felt.
Of all the smelts I ever smelt
I never smelt a smelt like that smelt smelt!

"Ihat," Danny said, striding in without knocking. Harpo glanced at him, his wig and props neatly packed away in the open trunk by the mirror, a towel wrapped around his head, and his face slathered in cold cream. He smiled an enormous smile and kept on singing as he wiped his face clean of cream and stage makeup:

Peasie Weasie, what's his name?
Peasie Weasie, Peasie Weasie, what's his game?
He will catch you if he can.
Peasie Weasie, Peasie Weasie is a bold bad man.

"Is that meant to be a warning?" Danny asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

"It's a song," the little man said, closing his trunk and stowing it safely away. "My brothers and I used to close our show with that, back in the old days. It has plenty of verses. Let me see…"

"No," Danny said, though with some difficulty. Being here, in this setting… The temptation to play along was very strong. Danny had all but lived in his imagination for most of his lonely childhood, and he knew exactly what Data meant when he said he was afraid of missing out on opportunities that would never come again. Ihat was dangling this living daydream before him like the proverbial carrot, and he could feel his resolve weakening. The alien's proffered opportunity to play with Harpo Marx in the pre-Hollywood phase of his career was enough to make him giddy, even as an android – but he had to be strong. Tasha would never give in to an illusion like this, and neither would he.

"I told you to drop the act," he stated firmly. "We both know you are not Harpo Marx and this is not the Casino Theater in 1924."

"But I like playing Harpo Marx," Ihat said, flashing his feathered form for just an instant before reverting to his guise. "Besides, I didn't bring you here to be a spoil sport," he continued in Harpo's early twentieth-century Manhattan accent. "You have much more important work to do."

Danny's eyes widened.

"Then, you are responsible for my presence here?"

'Harpo' removed the towel from his head and neatly brushed his thinning, brown hair before grabbing a jaunty hat and a surprisingly dapper looking vest and jacket. "Wouldn't want to catch a cold," he said, slipping them on. He glanced around the room as if to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything, patted his pockets, withdrew a red croquet ball and started tossing and catching it as he led Danny out into the busy corridor.
"Heading for the Algonquin, Mr. Marx?" a stage hand called. "That critic pal of yours, Woollcott, wanted to know if you'd be dropping in for the game tonight."

"Poker?" Danny said, his expression painfully wistful. "At the Algonquin Hotel? With the members of the Thanatopsis Literary and Inside Straight Club?" If only, if only, if only…

"Not tonight, Phil," Ihat called back. He winked at Danny and made a grand, theatrical 'after-you' gesture, clearly reveling in how much his dapper Harpo guise was irking Danny.

"And, in conclusion…" he said.

"I hate you," Danny muttered and stalked past him out the door back into the comparatively sterile Enterprise corridor.

"You envy me," Ihat corrected smugly, still tossing and catching the croquet ball. "You're a Harpo Marx fanboy. Admit it, admit it, admit it."

"Shut up!" Danny snapped, grabbing the ball in mid-toss. "You did this to me! You brought me here, ripped me away from my family, my home, transformed me into a machine—!"

"My, aren't we the grumpy one," Ihat observed, and pulled a green croquet ball from his pocket. "Learned to emote, have we? Does this mean you've unpuzzled the problem you've been set?"

Danny scowled and lobbed the red ball back at him. Ihat caught it, brought out a blue ball, and started juggling all three – normally at first, then in increasingly elaborate patterns.

"Learned this from W.C. Fields," he said. "Most talented juggler I ever saw. Did you know the Marx Brothers were the only stage act he couldn't follow? He told the manager he hurt his wrist and off he went!"

"Will you stop that," Danny said. "Just stop! Stop pretending. It is not fun anymore."

"It is for me," Ihat said, catching the croquet balls and replacing them in his pockets. "I couldn't plan a better disguise. No one on this ship would recognize Harpo Marx out of costume."

"Or in it, if not for that concert," Danny muttered.

"That was fun, wasn't it," Ihat said, and shot him a meaningful glance. "And very wise of you to suggest. You're far cleverer than you look, Danny boy. Light-years beyond the rest of your meat-brained species. But, that's to be expected, I suppose."

"What do you mean?"

"You've run long and far, my boy, but you can't deny you are your father's son. A Constructor knows when he's found one of his own, even among the organics."

Danny regarded the cryptic little man.

"Are you saying… My father…?"

"Oh, for goodness sakes!" Ihat exclaimed. "What came first, eh? The matter or the mind? I am a Constructor. I Construct. I Construct molecules and amino acids, organisms and electrical systems, meat brains and mechanical minds. In my time, the time before the Great Ending, I tinkered and whittled, crafted and programed. I built computer systems larger than stars; thickly inhabited galaxies so small, relatively, they could be stacked atop the pointy end of a needle. Others merely manipulate
matter and energy, shifting objects and beings from one state to another, one position to another, playing with what is already in the room. But who made those things? Hm? Who designed the room? Who dreamed up the notion of a room in which such things could be? I am a dreamer, a designer, a creator, a Constructor! One of only a few. But we recognize the creative spark when we see it. That rare ability to build reality from imagination. Data's Constructor achieved just that. And so can you."

Danny shook his head, hard.

"I am merely a repairman," he said. "Is that not why you brought me here?"

Ihat seemed to study him, staring long and deep.

"Where are you going?" he asked. "This section of the ship is full of guest quarters. The cybernetics lab is on Deck Twelve."

Danny averted his eyes.

"I wished to test a supposition," he said. "I wanted to know…"

"Know what?" Ihat pressed.

Danny pursed his lips, deeply reluctant to admit his motives but, finally, he let it out.

"I wanted to know if…while I'm in this form…if Schrödinger's Cat is still alive."

"That's an easy answer," Ihat said, seeming to know exactly what he meant. "It is and it isn't. Until you open the box. Are you willing to do that, Danny? Open the box and take a peek inside?"

Danny closed his eyes, clenched his fists, and slowly lowered his head.

"No."

"Then your cat is dead," Ihat said, "and your cat still lives. But we're not talking about cats, are we. You want to know if I intend to send you home."

Danny looked up, his eyes blazing.

"Well?"

"Say I can send you home right here and now, this moment…would you choose to go?"

Danny looked like a cartoon character who just realized he'd walked off a cliff. He swallowed several times, then turned on his heel and stalked back to the turbolift.

"I hate you!" he bellowed.

"Constructor!" Ihat returned, scampering to catch up with the android's long strides. He beamed at Danny. "Once sparked, you cannot deny your drive to create, to build, to dream! Your father felt that, deep, deep in his being. Now, you feel it too."

"Ihat," Danny said.

"Yeah, partner?"

Danny paused at the 'lift doors.
"One: Do not call me that. Ever. Two: I am not here to create, I am here to repair. If anyone on this ship has the creative spark you described, it is Data, not me. He is the one who constructed Lal. Three—"

"Data is an infant, a toddler!" Ihat protested. "Children imitate, albeit creatively. It takes a mature mind to innovate."

Danny's scowl turned defensive.

"If Data's development has been stunted, blame Dr. Soong, not Data," he snapped. "Since you enacted this transformation, I have continued to note symptoms of Asperger's syndrome in myself, but have observed no overt signs of the disorder in Data. This leads me to infer that the emotional and social 'shortcomings' Data experienced as an android may not be structural, but may instead be symptomatic of some external factor. If this is so, then something has been done to inhibit his development - some form of deliberate sabotage. Sabotage Data unwittingly passed on to his daughter when he transferred his programs to her brain. Sabotage I believe this damned chip was designed to address."

He dug in his pocket and held out the little box Data had given him.

Ihat's eyebrows shot way up, a strange, mischievous light making his round eyes seem to glow.

"How intriguing! If that is the case..." He smiled a wicked smile, then blinked up at Danny. "But, you were saying? About number three...?" he prompted, giving Danny a nudge with his elbow.

Danny shook his head, then looked straight down at the grinning little man.

"When all this is over...when you have what you want and I have what I want, and Data has what he needs..."

"Just a moment," Ihat interrupted, "what makes you so sure I'll get what I want?"

"That is an easy answer," Danny said wryly. "I can tell you have every intention of doing so."

"True," Ihat acknowledged. "Your question?"

The turbolift arrived and the pair stepped inside.

"It can wait," Danny said, and shoved the box back in his pocket. "Deck Twelve."

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

References include: "Peasie Weasie," lyrics and music by Charlie Van; Harpo Speaks, by Harpo Marx; Son of Harpo Speaks, by Bill Marx; Growing Up with Chico, by Maxine Marx; Man on the Flying Trapeze: The Life and Times of W.C. Fields by Simon Louvish; and The Cyberiad, by Stanislaw Lem.

Coming Up: What happened to Barclay? And what's going on in the Observation Lounge? Does Ihat have anything planned for Haftel and his team? Stay tuned! Thanks so much for reading! Comments and reviews are always welcome! :)
Chapter 23

Chapter Twenty-Two

Data had no idea where, or who, he was. He knew his name was Data, that he was a he, and that he had started life as a constructed machine consciousness, but other than that…

A sound like gulls and ocean waves caught his attention. He focused his eyes to find himself standing on a wide, wooden boardwalk overlooking a rather picturesque stretch of smooth, sandy beach, littered here and there with driftwood and interspersed with heavily eroded boulders. Behind him, a fairground stood still and quiet, as if asleep; rides, booths, and arcade games spiraling out like a labyrinth from a brightly painted dance pavilion/eating hall at the center.

"Wow… What is this place?"

A young human girl dashed into view, maybe five or six years old. She climbed up onto the boardwalk's weathered guard rail and stared wonderingly at the beach below.

"I always wanted to see the beach! Hey look, there's a stack of plastic buckets over here! And little shovels!"

She grinned at him.

"Want to build a sand castle with me?"

Before Data could answer, his attention was diverted once again. Something was pulling at his trouser leg. He looked down, to see a golden retriever puppy worrying the hem of his jeans with his little white teeth. He picked up the puppy and cradled it in his arms, marveling at how large it seemed. Or, maybe, Data had become very small.

"Hello, there," he said and smiled, scratching the puppy behind the ears.

"A puppy, a puppy!" the little girl cheered. "What's his name?"

"Bark!" said the puppy, and started whining, indicating he wanted to be let down.

"Barkmeee?" the girl said, imitating the whining sound. "That's a silly name."

"It sounded more like 'Barklee' to me," Data said, setting the little dog back on the boardwalk. The puppy yapped enthusiastically.

"I think he likes that name," the little girl said, and laughed. "Barclay the dog! So, he's Barclay and I'm Nora. What's your name?"

"Data," Data said. "But that is all I know."

"Data," Nora repeated. "That's a funny name too. Do you live around here?"

Data shook his head.

"Do you?" he asked.
"No, I'm a city girl," the girl told him. "I used to live in an apartment with my auntie and grandma, since my parents were always away working on starships out in space. But they never took me to the beach. Do you think these rides work?"

"They probably would, if there were someone around to operate them," Data said. "The fairground must not open until later in the day."

"Well, I sure hope it opens soon," Nora said. "Just look at all those rides! There's a merry-go-round, and a rollercoaster, and a Ferris wheel and— Hey, who's that?"

A man in a green jacket and slightly pointed green hat was walking toward them, pushing a small ice cream cart over the uneven boards.

"Ice-a cream!" he called out in an Italian-sounding accent. "Get-a your tutsi-frutsi ice-a cream!"

"It's the ice cream man!" the little girl squealed happily. She grabbed Data's hand. "Come on!"

"Get-a some-a tutsi-frutsi ice-a cream, right-a here!" the man was calling as they ran up to him, Barclay trailing close behind.

Data's eyes grew wide, and he looked from Nora way up to the ice cream man, then back to Nora.

"Something wrong there-a little boy?" the man asked. "You want-a some-a nice ice-a cream?"

"No, thank you," Data said. "But you must be mistaken. I am not a little boy."

"OK, you're a big-a boy!" the man said, and laughed a friendly laugh. "And-a this-a must be your little girlfriend, eh? Hey, cutie, how'd you like a nice-a strawberry popsicle? On-a the house!"

He handed her the frozen treat and she beamed.

"Thanks, mister!"

"Excuse me, sir," Data said politely, before the man could walk away again. "Could you tell us where we are?"

"Lost, eh?" the man said sympathetically. "That's-a too bad."

"No, we are not lost," Data said. "At least, I do not believe we are."

The green-clad man frowned down at him.

"You're a strange kid," he said. "But I like-a you, so I'll-a tell you a bit about this-a here place...not-a that you'll remember. It's-a very, very special, this place. I made it for you to play and learn and grow and feel. Because a wise-a man, he make me realize, when you're-a fighting for your life, three heads are better than two."

Data wrinkled his forehead.

"I do not understand," he said.

"Me neither," Nora said, around her dripping popsicle.

"You will, by the time I'm-a coming back," the man said.

"When will that be?" Data asked.
"Oh, some eighteen, nineteen years. But don't you worry – time is relative. For me, and all your friends on the outside, the years, they'll be just minutes. So, have fun, you kids! And your little dog, too!" he said, and marched off with his cart, disappearing around the corner of a big, wooden racetrack game. Data ran after him, but the man was gone, vanished, without a trace.

"Does this mean we are prisoners here?" he called out anyway. "Trapped for eighteen years?"

A whirring, machine sound started up and, suddenly, the entire fairground came to life. Lights lit, wheels turned, and music played. And there were people too, trickling in from what seemed to be a dirt parking lot, not far from the sloping hills and curving, tree-lined streets of a small, New England-looking town.

"Oh, yay, it's open!" Nora cheered, her face and hands all red and sticky from the popsicle. She pointed to the pavilion, where a small group was singing and playing instruments while people danced. "And there's a band! I know this song! My grandma used to play it when I was very, very small!"

Oh me, oh my, oh you,  
Whatever shall I do?  
Hallelujah, the question is peculiar!  
I'd give a lot of dough  
If only I could know  
The answer to my question: Is it yes or is it no?

Does your chewing gum lose its flavor on the bedpost overnight?  
If your mother says don't chew it, do you swallow it in spite?  
And you catch it on your tonsils and you heave it left and right (eek eek!)  
Does your chewing gum lose its flavor on the bedpost overnight?

"Oh, I love this place!" she cried, and grabbed a pail and spade. "Come on, Data, I'll race you to the water!"

Data hesitated…just a moment. Something about this place…about them…just seemed…wrong, somehow. But, the music was fun and upbeat, the air was filled with the sounds of the sea and of laughter, and it wasn't long before any lingering misgivings began to fade. He was here, at the beach. The sun was bright and warm, the breeze was salty-sweet, and he couldn't let Nora beat him to the water.

"Come on, Barclay," he called to the puppy over the sound of the band. "Last one to the ocean is a stinky fish!"

Does your chewing gum lose its flavor on the bedpost overnight?  
If your mother says don't chew it, do you swallow it in spite?  
And you catch it on your tonsils and you heave it left and right  
Does your chewing gum lose its flavor on the bedpost overnight?  
On the bedpost overnight!

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes
References include: "Does Your Chewing Gum Lose Its Flavour (On the Bedpost Overnight)" by Lonnie Donegan, 1959; A Day at the Races.

And that's it for the already-written stuff. Next chapter will be all new. Thanks so much for reading! Stay Tuned! :)

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty-Three

"I said all senior staff, Captain," Admiral Haftel snapped, plunking himself down at the head of the Observation Lounge's long conference table. Two aides flanked him, displacing Picard, Riker, Troi, Crusher, Worf, and Geordi from their accustomed seats. "Where is your Operations Officer? And I want that Daniel Soong in here, right now!"

"Admiral," Picard said calmly, "as we have been trying to explain, the spread of the Ihat virus has affected intraship communications—"

"I am well aware of the sorry state of your ship's systems, Picard," the admiral said coldly. "Perhaps, if you exhibited more caution when scanning unknown alien artifacts, this situation could have been avoided."

Geordi bristled.

"Listen, Admiral, we're doing the best we can," he said. "We had a diagnostic team working to contain Ihat—"

"And wasn't that a rousing success!" the admiral retorted, rubbing his bruised hip. "Tell me, Commander, where is your team now?"

"It appears Ihat has them trapped in the holodeck, sir," Geordi admitted, his mouth a thin line.

"Who's in there, Mr. La Forge?" Riker asked.

"Lt. Barclay was handling the trap," Geordi said. "I sent Data in to assist, and one of the research scientists went with him. Nora Maskeline. If Danny left Ten Forward to join them, it's probable the four of them are in there now."

"Probable?" the admiral repeated, and frowned at Picard. "Then, you don't know their status?"

"As you are aware, Admiral, our computer has been compromised," Picard said. "We have been unable to establish contact with the holodeck, although we are—"

"I know, I know, you're working on it," the admiral growled, and shook his head. "This is unacceptable, Picard. All your pussyfooting around this Ihat menace has only succeeded in making a bad situation worse. I want this ship on full shut-down – every department, every system, including the most basic life support – then rebooted in safe mode from pre-infection back-ups."

Riker leaned forward, pushing his loose hair back from his face.

"Admiral, if we do that, all information we collected from the research station will be lost: data and records representing ten years of work. Besides, there'll still be no guarantee the Ihat virus wouldn't just—"

The admiral cut him off with a scowl.

"Commander, if any research, personal logs, or other data is lost, that's just too bad. As of right now,
"Admiral, I understand what—" Picard started, but Haftel spoke right over him, causing the captain to grit his teeth.

"My orders, Captain," the admiral said, "are that all traces of this invasive Ihat program are to be purged and eradicated, once and for all. Wiped out, by whatever means necessary. If that means expunging and reformattting the ship's main computer core, the core will be thoroughly reformatted. If it means destroying the ship itself, this ship will be destroyed. The Ihat virus must not be spread to any other Federation systems. Am I understood?"

He glared around the table, meeting each officer's eyes in turn.

Picard frowned, his slender hands folded on the table in front of him.

"Admiral, what you propose would be entirely reasonable were we dealing with a standard, self-replicating code," he said with careful, practiced calm. "But, our dealings with Ihat strongly indicate he is much more than a mere computer program. It is my belief that we may be dealing with a life form, here. An intelligent, sentient electronic consciousness fully capable of anticipating our actions and taking mindful action against us."

"And there it is," Haftel said, and sighed angrily. "I know you have a soft spot for machines, Captain, but this is not the time for sentiment. When a body is attacked by bacteria, or parasites, we don't sit around turning the cure into an ethical debate: we kill the little buggers by administering the proper medication to eradicate the infection. And those are legitimate life forms! A computer virus is not alive, no matter how imaginatively you may attempt to stretch the definition. Now, I want—"

"Wait," Geordi broke in angrily. "Stop, I don't understand this. There are electronic beings that have been determined to be legitimate life forms by the Federation! Data is the top example, but what about Wesley's nanites? The Exo-Comps? Why is it such a stretch for you to acknowledge that this Ihat program may also be alive?"

"Mr. La Forge…" Picard said, his feminine voice low with warning.

"I know, Captain," Geordi said, "but, with all due respect to the Admiral, here, we tried the quarantine approach! You all saw how Ihat broke free – how he reacted to our efforts by closing off the holodeck, trapping our people as we would have trapped him! If that's not an indication that Ihat is self-aware – that we are, in fact, up against a real, honest-to-goodness, conscious, thinking intelligence – I don't know what is!"

The admiral closed his eyes and pursed his lips.

"Picard," he said, "I can see your crew's…regard…for Mr. Data has cultivated a tendency to leap to anthropomorphic conclusions about other constructed devices – conclusions that are not always appropriate, or warranted."

"Actually, I find the Commander's question quite valid, Admiral," Picard said, letting just a hint of anger sharpen his voice. "As you have said, if we cannot find a way to stop, or at least contain, Ihat, the safety – not only of this ship and crew – but of the entire Federation may well be at stake. Previous attempts to treat Ihat as a standard invasive virus have proven unsuccessful…as Ihat has quite dramatically demonstrated." He gestured to himself and the other physically altered members of his staff. "Now, you may accuse us of 'anthropomorphizing' the Ihat program, but given the circumstances, is it not the more prudent course to acknowledge there is a need to change our tactics
– to treat Ihat as something capable of reason and intelligent thought – whether you accept him as a life form or not?

The admiral opened his mouth, but his wasn't the voice they heard.

"We're following the wrong track…"

Deanna spoke in a deep, quiet rumble, her broad forehead furrowed beneath her short, dark curls.

"What's that, Counselor?" the admiral said impatiently.

Deanna turned her head slightly, her black eyes distant, as if focused on something deep within herself.

"The Marx Brothers," she said, slowly becoming more present as she spoke. "Why would Ihat choose the Marx Brothers…? If he intends to harm us, even destroy us… Why revive three ancient comedians only a few of us were familiar with? And, why alter our forms? If he wants to use us as templates to reconstruct his race, why not just do it? Why all the teasing? The games?"

"The concert," Geordi added, nodding to himself. "Yeah, Counselor. Danny said he thought the Marx Brothers carried a message of some kind. Or maybe that they were the message."

"What is this?" the admiral scoffed. "Are we going to start psychoanalyzing the intentions of computer programs now?"

"Forgive me, Admiral," Picard said, "but our experience—"

"Your experience is with starship tactics and charting space phenomena!" the admiral retorted. "Whereas I have spent my life immersed in the field of cybernetics research!"

"Perhaps, Admiral, if you had spent more time in the field rather than remaining so deeply entrenched in your lab work, you would be able to see—"

"See what, Captain?" Haftel challenged, his expression dangerous.

"That the realities we face out here are often more bizarre, more unbelievable, than the wildest theories we could hope to envisage on our own," Picard said quietly. "If you cannot widen your scope enough to allow for the possibility that what you think you know is only the start of understanding, your expertise will be no use to us here. In our business, there is no factor so limiting as a stubbornly closed mind."

"Captain," the admiral rumbled, "that sounds dangerously close to insubordination to me."

"Does it?" Picard said musingly. "I thought it more of an invitation."

The admiral's glare turned contemplative, but it didn't shift, or soften. He folded his hands and leaned forward, looking irritably around the table at Picard's senior staff.

"All right," he grunted. "At the risk of wasting yet more time: Tell me about these Marx Brothers."

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes
References include TNG: Evolution; The Quality of Life; The Offspring; Contagion; The Measure of A Man; Masks; Where No One Has Gone Before.

Next Time: Back to Data in the holodeck...and possibly a glimpse at what Danny and Ihat are up to. Stay tuned! :)


Chapter Twenty-Four

"Come on, Data, it's not fair!" the ten-year-old whined. "You've had two turns already! I want a go!"

"My tokens, my turn," the boy retorted, feeding another bronze coin into the pinball machine and readying his hands at the controls. "When you get a paper route, you can pay for your own tokens instead of always mooching mine."

Nora crossed her arms and scowled as he skillfully flipped the little metal ball around the blinking, flashing board, racking up points with every bell-like ping.

"So, now it's my fault our fosters won't buy me a new bike?"

"Mine's used. And, Mother said you could use hers if… Gah—just…hold on. Can't you see I'm going for a record, here?" Data said distractedly, sticking his tongue out slightly as he bent and swayed along with the tilting table, fighting to keep the little ball from falling.

"…such a jerk…" Nora growled, very seriously considering shoving him, when she noticed a trio of older boys had stopped to watch. A few more drifted over, then a few more, drawn to the quickening music and rat-a-tat pings of what was clearly a very intense game.

"Whoa, man, look at the kid go!"

"He's a machine, man. A machine!"

Within moments, Nora found herself crowded out by the cheering pack. She kicked at a loose pebble and stalked toward the boardwalk to kneel beside Barclay. Barclay looked up at her and flopped his tail on the boards in greeting.

"Can you believe it, Barkers?" she muttered, scratching the big dog behind the ears. "He's got a stinking fan club! I'll never get a chance to play…"

The pinball music got faster and faster, the flashing lights practically strobing as the crowd around Data continued to grow.

Suddenly, the board went dark and silent.

For a moment, just a brief instant, the entire fairground seemed to hold its breath. Even the music from the pavilion seemed to hush. Data stood frozen, his eyes fixed on the display high above him…

A row of digital zeros appeared and the numbers began to roll up, and up, and up…and up…

"YES!" he crowed, thrusting his arms in the air as the older boys around him burst into cheers, bumping his fist and slapping high and low fives. "New high score! I am the Pinball Wizard!"

He turned his bright, beaming grin to Nora and waved, gesturing happily to the stream of prize tickets spewing from the machine.

"Hey, I did it! You can have your turn now!" he shouted.
Nora rolled her eyes. The crowd was already trickling away but she knew, even without an audience, she'd look like a goober if she tried to follow that performance.

"Never mind!" she shouted back, snapping Barclay's leash to his collar and standing up. "Me and Barclay are going for a walk."

"OK! Give me a second to grab my tickets and I'll come with you!"

"No, you keep playing," she said bitterly. "They're your game tokens, after all."

Data looked confused.

"Nora…?"

But she'd already turned her back and started walking toward the sandy beach, Barclay padding amiably along beside her.

Data gave an exasperated sigh and ripped the tickets free.

"Why's she have to be such a jerk about everything lately? Just because I got a job…"

He stuffed the thick ticket stack in his jacket pocket and ran after her, shouting, "Hey, Barclay's my dog too! You guys can't go without me!"

*******

No one understands…
No one knows my plan.
Why the dancing, shouting, why the shrieks of pain?
The lovely music?
Why the smell of burning autumn leaves?

"What is that song you keep muttering to yourself?" Ihat asked, leaving the make-shift, one-man croquet game he'd been playing around Lal's diagnostic elevator to lean his elbows on the cluttered lab table, watching Danny map positronic pathways at a shockingly inhuman speed. The powerful being still wore his Harpo Marx disguise, and was clearly reveling in the impish persona he'd adopted.

Danny didn't raise his eyes from his work.

"It's something my father used to hum now and then, when he was fiddling with his android designs," the android said, his pale fingers flying over the console. "A very old tune, from the late twentieth century. 'No One Knows My Plan.' He liked it because it references Plato's Allegory of the Cave."

Danny smirked.

"My father really identified with that whole 'misunderstood philosopher' thing...the 'enlightened' one, preaching deep truths to idiots who mistake shadows for reality..."

Ihat snorted a little.

"Well, it seems a fitting title," he said. "Why don't you sing it out loud, let me hear the words?"

Danny still didn't look up.
"I'll do you one better," he said. "Computer, identify and play audio file: They Might Be Giants' 'No One Knows My Plan.' Album: John Henry, published 1994."

The computer chirped. A moment later, a squeal of trumpets sounded, pounding out a fast-paced beat. Ihat had the computer replay the song twice, then, the third time, he began to sing along, as loudly and with as much exuberance as he'd sung that strange 'Peasie Weasie' song.

"Sing it with me!" the disguised being said as the tune began again.

"Only if you lend a hand here," Danny said, and slid him a chunk of Lal's cerebellum. "I presume a skilled Constructor such as yourself would know his way around a positronic brain?"

"Cake," Ihat assured him, and slid into the seat across from him. "Cheesecake. Especially compared to that time I was commissioned to Construct the mitochondrion organelle. Now, there's a masterpiece of craftsmanship! A real powerhouse! Not that I expect adulation for my designs but, yeah, you can thank me any time."

Danny regarded him, uncertain whether the entity was being serious or not, but he wasn't in the mood to waste time encouraging him with questions.

"Androids are synthetic constructs. They—we—do not have mitochondria," he said grumpily, flexing his mechanical fingers.

"True enough," Ihat acknowledged, pointedly ignoring Danny's accusing glare. "Hence, my comment about the cheesecake. We won't have to be mucking about with all those fiddly, persnickety bits, like ATP and DNA." He picked up the little metal construct in front of him and turned it over and over in his hands. "What exactly do you want me to do with this?"

Danny sighed.

"Map the pathways, make note of all anomalies," he instructed, and handed him a padd. "When you're done with the cerebellum, move on to the occipital lobe. I have to get to work on this so-called 'emotion' chip."

He pulled the box from his pocket and flipped it open, frowning down at the charred little sequin inside. His android eyes didn't require the assistance of magnifying lenses, but he slid the headset on anyway, more out of the comfort of habit than anything. He grabbed a small vial of a specialized cleaning solution he'd replicated, dropped the chip in, and gave the vial a little swirl. After twenty seconds, he gently snagged the much shinier chip from the now-cloudy liquid with long tweezers and set it down on a square of sterile gauze, leaning in close so he could better see what he had to work with.

Across the table, Ihat whistled, squinting at the remaining bits of Lal's brain through a magnifying headset of his own.

"Whoa, talk about scrambled eggs," he commented. "Any idea what triggered this fatal instability?"

"Yep. But, I'm hoping the key to fixing the problems lies with this chip," Danny said, and reached for a particularly delicate tool. "Unfortunately, the nano-circuitry just here is partly melted…and it's pretty badly warped over here. Thing's nearly in as bad shape as Lal's poor brain… Wait— What the hell…?"

Danny's frown deepened, and he leaned in closer, upping the magnification level of his eyes and the headset.
"That bastard…!" he whispered in astonishment. "How the hell did he…?"

"Find something?" Ihat asked curiously.

Danny poked at the chip for a while longer, then sat back and shook his head.

"We have to find Data," he said. "He needs to be here for this."

Ihat glanced at the padd's clock display and did a quick count on his fingers.

"Just…eight more minutes," he said. "He'll be ready by then."

Danny knit his brows.

"Ready? What do you mean, ready? Ready for what?"

"For whatever," Ihat said, and smiled his most enigmatic smile. "Meantime, better get back to work. This poor girl's redefined the term 'scatterbrained'. Wouldn't want her father to see her like this." He chuckled and glanced toward the ceiling, gleefully ignoring Danny's dirty look. "Hey, Computer, let's have that Plan song again! Danny's going to sing with me this time, so play it good and loud!"

"No, Danny won't," Danny said.

"Yes, Danny will, because he said he would if I lent a hand," Ihat retorted cheerfully, efficiently inputting data with a few quick taps at the padd. "Look, this is me, lending a hand! That means you gotta sing, Danny-boy!"

"I hate this," Danny muttered. "What am I doing here? I should be home, with my family, not tinkering around with bits and bobs of machinery like…like…"

He closed his eyes and turned away, unwilling to say the words out loud.

"Dr. Soong?" Ihat supplied brightly, and started to sing. "His name is your name too! Whenever we go out, the people always shout, there goes—"

Danny hissed through his teeth.

"Ah, don't be a wart, Junior," Ihat said, and beamed. "Gotta have music while you work. Play it again, Computer! Oooh – and there's the trumpets! Come on, Danny, I don't hear you!"

Danny sighed a long-suffering sigh and reluctantly opened his mouth to sing.

******

Baptized with a perfect name
The doubting one by heart
Alone without himself

War between him and the day
Need someone to blame
In the end, little he can do alone

You believe but what you see?
You receive but what you give?

Caress the one, the never-fading
"This song always puts me in mind of Milton's 'Paradise Lost,'" Data said, glancing at the band as he and Nora danced 'round and 'round the pavilion – the only teenage couple improvising their moves using actual dance steps.

Nora snorted a laugh.

"OK, you officially read way too much," she said. "Can't you just enjoy the melody? The energy of the music?"

"I do," Data said. "But I also enjoy reading, and analyzing what I read."

"I know, I know. It's the same with shows and holovids. You can never just watch something, you always have to step out of the story, try to piece together all the connections for yourself before the characters have a chance to get there."

"I can't help that," Data said. "It's part of who I am, how I think."

"The thing is, you never stop thinking," Nora said. "Always seeking out puzzles to solve…"

Data looked at her.

"I thought you liked that about me. My busy brain…"

"I do. It's just…"

She sighed and took his hand, leading him off the dance floor and toward a small picnic bench near the boardwalk. Barclay loped over to join them, flopping his aging bones onto the soft, shaded sand under the table.

Data gave the big old dog an affectionate pat and slid onto the wooden seat, Nora sitting opposite him.

"Data…I don't want you to go," she said. "That busy, brilliant brain of yours – it's better than that place, that sort of life… Harvard is just waiting for us. Why don't you come with me? Become a researcher? We could work at the same lab someday! Stay close to home…"

Data lowered his eyes and sighed.

"I…can't," he said. "As much as I love this place…as much as I love you…"

He met her eyes then, his hand reaching for hers.

"I'm seventeen years old, Nora, and for as long as I can remember, I've been living right here, never once budging from this tiny, seaside town. I feel… I feel I can't sit still anymore!" he said passionately. "Just the thought of working in a lab, stuck on the same planet day after day, year after year… It makes me feel…trapped. Confined. I want to travel, Nora. I want to serve aboard a starship, to explore our galaxy, to experience the sort of life I've only read about. Out there…in space…that's where the real puzzles are. Waiting. That's where I know I can be useful."

"But Starfleet…" Nora squeezed his hand, her expression strained. "It's not just about exploration and scientific discovery, Data. There's a military aspect too. What if…what if there's another war?"
What if your away mission runs into trouble? Do you think… Would you be able to…kill…another being?"

"Nora…" Data shook his head affectionately. "Statistics show the majority of Starfleet Officers go their entire careers without ever employing deadly force. Phasers do have stun settings."

"You'd still be expected to shoot people," Nora protested. "I don't like it, Data. The Fleet…it isn't you!"

"It's not like I'll be pursuing the command track," he said. "I plan to become a science officer. I wish to be a practicing exobiologist, to actively study life on other worlds!"

"I've talked to Fleet vets too, Data," Nora said. "I know what Starfleet duty can do. I don't want the service to change you. I don't want to see you hardened…or hurt…"

Data tightened his lips very slightly, then stood and pulled her up with him, drawing her into a warm embrace.

"None of us can know what the future will make of us," he said, pulling back just enough to look her in the eyes. "You are so special to me. You have been my friend, my confidant, and I do love you. But, our dreams differ. They have…for a very long time. And, with our high school graduation so near…"

"I know…" Nora sniffled slightly and pressed her head against his shoulder, holding him close. "Everything's ending, Data. Everything we've ever known… It's like it's all been a dream, sharing a childhood here, in this place…with you…"

"I wouldn't have wished it any other way," Data said softly, and leaned in for a kiss. They had shared many kisses over the years, some passionate, some sweet, some sad. But this one…Nora felt it in her bones… It was a kiss of farewell.

She trembled a little and pulled away, but didn't let go of his hand.

"Oh…" she said, tilting her head just slightly – a mannerism she'd unconsciously picked up from him. "They've changed bands. What do you think? One last dance before we head home?"

Data smiled.

"I'd like that," he said, and allowed her to lead him back into the pavilion, where a woman was singing a soft, playful song…it seemed, just for them:

You say it's only a paper moon
Sailing over a cardboard sea
But it wouldn't be make believe if you believed in me

Yes, its only a canvas sky
Hanging over a muslin tree
But it wouldn't be make-believe if you believed in me

Without your love it's a honky tonk parade
Without your love it's a melody played in a penny arcade

It's a Barnum and Bailey world
Just as phony as it can be
But it wouldn't be make-believe if you believed in me
It's phony it's plain to see
How happy I would be
If you believed in me!

Chapter End Notes


Coming Up: Danny and Data confront the emotion chip...and its contents... Next Time: A bit about the research scientists. There's a lot more of this story still to come so stay tuned, and thanks so much for reading! :)
Chapter Twenty-Five

Dr. Dumont paced her quarters, the hem of her long robe sweeping the floor as she moved.

"I've got a message from the Man In The Moon for you, just you," a rather nasal male voice warbled, and she jumped, letting out a startled little squeak.

"Who—?"

"He said to tell you there's a bench in the park for two, just two!" the man with the painted-on mustache continued, and slid across the room to take her hands in an impromptu dance. "I know you should be sleeping and I'm keeping you awake. But I'm just delivering a message he told me to take... The evening found me lonely and I thought you might be lonely too. So, I brought a message from The Man In The Moon for you!"

"Stop this — stop it!" Dr. Dumont said, fighting to control the blush heating her face. "What are you —"

"Oh, Maggie, dear Maggie!" the man said, clapping her hands in his. "Why don't you run away with me? We could be so happy together, nestled away from the troubles of the galaxy. I—"

"Dr. Hackenbush, that is quite enough!" she exclaimed, pulling away and staring down at the shorter man in the baggy black suit. "What in the world do you think you're doing!"

"Me?" the mustached man retorted. "What about you? Mine's not the only mask in this room, toots. You're in this just as deep as we are. Deeper, if these starship people ever find out what you and your people really—"

"No! Stop!" she sputtered. "Stop now! You can't possibly know—"

"Can too," he said, his dark eyes finding hers through his old-fashioned glasses. "I've got a nose for these things."

She stared at him, her flushed face going pale.

"What exactly do you want?" she demanded. "How did you even get in here? I know I didn't hear the doors."

"Ah. That's because I didn't use them," the man said, and moved closer, suggestively waggling his eyebrows. "This is to be our secret tryst." He rolled the 'r' and ended on a high squeak.

"Oooh!" she growled, and stalked toward the window, out of his reach. "I've had enough of this game. We both know you are not Dr. Hugo Hackenbush or Julius 'Groucho' Marx or whoever you may appear to be, any more than I am Dr.—"

"Now, that's not entirely true," he interrupted. "Appearances may be deceiving…which is pretty useful in a dodge like this. Who are we trying to kid if not ourselves?"

The taller woman regarded him.
"Who are you, really?" she demanded.

"You first," he retorted playfully, then smirked at himself. "There's a witty riposte, if I ever heard one."

"Well, you said it, not me," she said, wringing her hands. "Are you… Might you be that Ihat person who upset the crew so badly in Ten Forward?"

The mustached man stepped back, affronted.

"I should say not!" he said, and pulled an unlit cigar from his inside pocket, which he kept between his fingers as he spoke. "We may be kin, but that's as far as it goes. Go on, have another guess. I'll wait."

Dr. Dumont shook her head.

"Oh, I can't do this," she said. "If you're not Ihat, who are you?"

The shorter man regarded her through sharp, narrowed eyes, then shrugged.

"Ah, what's the harm," he said. "After all, I'm sure I know who you are…or, perhaps I should say 'what'. And I know what you've done. That's enough leverage to hold over anyone's head."

The taller woman closed her eyes.

"Please…" she whispered.

The man stepped forward, then grabbed her hand and began pumping it like a used car salesman eager to close a deal.

"The name's Korgano," he said. "And that bit about The Man In The Moon? That's me! Well, my symbol, anyway. Masaka's got the sun and Ihat the living earth. We make a good team, the three of us—when we're not out to kill each other, that is. The fiery Eternal, the impulsive Constructor, and me: the suave, cool-headed Preserver… An elegant balance of primal energies, entirely at your service."

He smiled and gave a gracious bow.

"I…I don't understand," she said.

"I understand that you're not as you seem," Korgano said. "How long have you been holding that form? Five years?"

The woman bit her lip.

"Eight?"

She shook her head.

Korgano's eyes widened.

"Don't tell me it's been all ten!"

"We didn't know they were intelligent!" the woman exclaimed, her face reddening again, this time with shame. "When we first came across the human researchers, our only concern was their mineral content. We had no way of knowing they were living, thinking beings, like us! Not until... Until
"After you'd absorbed them?" Korgano said, quirking a painted eyebrow.

She nodded, her eyes fixed on the carpet.

"The entire research team?"

"They were carbon-based creatures," she snapped. "We saw them only as mineral supplements! It was only after we'd ingested their material structures into our being that we began to feel their thoughts…their conscious awareness…"

"So, you digested their bodies, but retained their memories, is that it?" Korgano asked.

She shifted her feet uncomfortably.

"When we realized what they were, what we'd done…"

She sighed, and clasped her hands in front of her.

"My people have always prided themselves on their respect for life. We knew we had to make amends. We made it our business to learn all we could about these strange meat-creatures, to discover just what they'd been doing on our world…and take on the tasks they'd been sent to complete. Our initial intent had been to transmit the data they'd come for back to their people, then destroy the research station…make it look like an accident. But, the more we learned about them…their language, their work, their socio-cultural systems… The more curious we became. So, when the Enterprise arrived to collect the researchers, we…"

"Took their place?"

"We meant no harm," she said, her voice barely a whisper. "We only wished to learn. To experience this alien culture for ourselves…if only for a brief while…"

Korgano smiled.

"I know the feeling," he said, and covered her fidgeting hands with his. "So, you got a name?"

She snuffled a very slight laugh.

"Yes, but it cannot be pronounced," she said. "We are crystalline beings. Our language is one of light, not sound. In this form, I go by Maggie. In remembrance of the woman I...absorbed."

"All right then, Maggie," Korgano said, and led her to the little two-seater sofa by the coffee table. "Why don't you sit down, put your feet up, and I'll get us both a drink. See, I came here tonight because I have a proposition for you."

She shot him a wary look.

"No, no, not that kind of proposition," he said, and smiled. "What I have to say is actually quite serious. In fact, it concerns the survival of both our peoples."

*******

Nora Maskelyne met Data at the public transport station at the top of the hill and pulled him into a fierce embrace.
'I came as soon as I could,' Data said, returning the hug before pulling back. 'It's fortunate my ship was scheduled for maintenance at Utopia Planitia, or I wouldn't have been able to get away so quickly. How is he?'

Nora shook her head and gave his hand a squeeze.

'Not so good,' she said. 'I know he's an old dog. I mean, eighteen years… That's not too bad for a yellow lab.'

'The average life span for the breed is twelve to thirteen years,' Data noted, but his voice was somber. 'Nora, you know he—'

But, she averted her eyes and changed the subject.

'You look good, Ensign,' she said teasingly, weaving her arm with his as they walked down the sharply sloping street toward the beach. 'The uniform…it's very sharp. Blue's a good color on you.'

'Does this mean you've changed your mind about my decision to join Starfleet?'

She gave a little shrug.

'You were right about us having different dreams, Data,' she said. 'Different aptitudes. You've always been able to handle yourself in a crowd…never afraid to stand up and speak your mind, guide a conversation where you want it to go… Me...I tend to shrink to nothing under that kind of pressure. I don't like being noticed.'

'Yet, you wish to pursue a career as a scientist?' Data said.

'Just one of a team,' she said, and smiled at the look he shot her. 'Hey, you leader-types have to have someone to lead, don't you? I don't want that kind of headache. I just want to do my work and be left alone. Still, it's so unfair, Data.' She gave him a nudge. 'Here you are, barely twenty-three, and already an officer, a specialist, out actually doing what you could only daydream about when we were kids… While, I've still got to get through a master's and a PhD program before I get where I want to go.'

'I tried to warn you,' Data said.

'Yes, I know, I know,' she said, and patted his arm. 'But, while Starfleet may have been the right choice for you, the service would never work out for me. I'm sure of it. I'm better off on the slow path, climbing my way up that ivory tower.'

She glanced at him while they walked through the fairground, keeping her eyes on his face until he looked at her.

'I've missed you, my friend,' she said quietly. 'Every time I pass by the pavilion… Or, that old pinball machine! You know, I often imagine I can see you there, this skinny little kid, fighting so hard to beat his own high score… It really wasn't all that long ago.'

Data glanced at the scoreboard and smiled.

'I see my record still stands,' he said.

'And it probably always will,' Nora teased. 'No one knows that machine's tricks better than you.'

His smile broadened, just briefly, and he let go of her hand to approach the machine. He ran his
palms over its worn, silvery edges, his forehead slightly creased.

"Something wrong?" she asked.

"Either the machine's gotten lower, or I've gotten taller," he said.

"You've definitely gotten taller," she said, and leaned her head against his shoulder. "We used to be the same height, remember?"

"Yes," he said, and flicked the controls with his fingers. "Back when we were ten or twelve. I actually had my last growth spurt while I was at the academy."

"Well then, I guess this is us. We're both about as tall as we're going to be...though, I've read our brains will keep maturing long into our twenties," she said, and started rifling through her purse. "So, you want a go? I bet I could dig out a token or two—"

"No, no, I didn't come here to play," Data said, and dropped his hands to his sides. "We should go find Barclay. I don't want him to be alone."

"Oh, he isn't," Nora assured him as they continued toward the boardwalk. "I asked the ice cream man to keep an eye on him while I ran up to get you."

"The ice cream man...?"

Data squinted up his face, his eyes falling on an oddly dressed little man leaning against a very old-fashioned push cart he'd parked right at the spot where the boardwalk met the sandy beach.

Something twitched, far back in Data's memory. Something he couldn't quite bring to the surface...

"Hey-a, will-a you look at you two kids!" the ice cream man exclaimed in a sort-of-Italian accent, his whole face beaming with pride. "I-a tell-a you this: whoever it was said-a time was relative, he-a sure knew what-a he was talkin' about, eh?"

"Hello," Data said politely, not quite sure what the man was getting at and far more concerned with the dog at his feet.

"Hey, Barkers," he said, kneeling down to give the dog a warm hug. "How are you doing, old pal?"

The elderly dog thumped his tail against the sand in eager greeting.

Nora crouched beside them and stroked the dog's long back.

"Arthritis has been creeping into his joints and hips," she said quietly. "It's hard for him to get up sometimes."

"Poor guy," Data said, and pulled a small sachet from his pocket. "Here, I brought you some treats. Your favorite chicken jerky."

The dog's pale eyes brightened and he sat up, happily accepting the treats.

"Look at that face," Nora said with bittersweet affection. "He still thinks he's a puppy."

The treats gone, Data scratched behind the dog's ears, then patted his head and stood up.

"Thank you for watching our dog, sir," he said to the ice cream man.
"Hey, it was-a no trouble," the man said. "So-a, you kids about ready to be-a headin' out?"

"Out where?" Nora asked.

"Out-a there!" the man said, and the holodeck doors appeared between their startled faces and the crashing waves.

Nora and Data both gasped as a sudden, peculiar sensation passed over them, each of them undergoing subtle physical changes as they returned to how they'd looked when they first entered the holodeck. Their figures filled out, their features aged slightly, their wild disorientation only growing as their real memories began to return.

"Oh, my God," Nora said, releasing a very awkward laugh as she touched her face, her clothes, her hair... "I can't believe... I thought I was so grown up! And you, Data!"

She brushed her fingers over the fine lines near his eyes, the pips on the collar of his gold uniform.

"Or, should I say, Lieutenant Commander?" she observed.

"What has happened?" Data asked, turning his bewildered blue stare from Nora to the ice cream man. "Why did you—? What was the point of all this!"

"Human emotions, they're-a tricky business," the man said. "They're-a not-a somethin' you can adjust to overnight. Most-a people, they-a get a lifetime to grow into their feelings. You, I gave eighteen minutes."

Nora squinted.

"Eighteen...? So...everything we went through, the time we spent in that town growing up together, going to school..."

"It was all real," Data said quietly, his blue eyes very wide. "The games, the summer jobs, the choices we made... It was a gift. A wonderful, beautiful gift..."

Nora still looked uncertain, and rather miffed, but the little man in the short green jacket and softly pointed hat was beaming like the sun, herding them to the door, where the team Geordi had sent to get them out stood uncertainly in the corridor.

"We are all right," Data assured them. "I will report as much to Commander La Forge and the captain. You may return to your duty stations now."

"Aye, sir," the crewmen acknowledged, and strode hurriedly away, the fear of ending up gender-swaped or otherwise altered by the little ice cream man they clearly thought was Ihat quickening their pace.

The man laughed and clapped Data on the shoulder.

"Your-a counterpart, Danny, he's-a waiting for you in-a the cybernetics lab," he said. "It's-a big-a surprise, so you better hurry. We'll-a be with the admiral whenever you're-a done."

"But—" Data started, only to blink and snap his mouth shut.

Nora, Barclay, and the ice cream man had all vanished. He was alone in the corridor.

Data glanced back at the empty holodeck grid, then slowly moved out of range of the door sensors, watching until the sliding doors had shut completely. He glanced down at his hands, his uniform, and
straightened his shoulders, a small but happy smile quirking across his human face as he headed for the turbolift and whatever new surprise Danny had waiting for him in the cybernetics lab.

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References include TNG: Masks; Doctor Who: The Stones of Blood; "A Message From The Man In The Moon" by Gus Kahn, Walter Jurmann and Bronislaw Kaper (1937). The song was cut from "A Day At The Races," but Groucho sang a brief reprise at the very end of the movie.
Chapter Twenty-Six

Geordi was so focused on getting to the cybernetics lab, he almost rammed into another officer heading in the same direction.

"Oh, sorry..." he muttered distractedly, dodging the man without pausing his quick stride.

"Geordi!"

The familiar voice made the engineer stop short and turn. The man he'd passed smiled and hurried to catch up.

"Data?"

"Yes, Geordi. I'm back!"

"Data," the engineer said again, as if to confirm, still not quite sure how to feel about the human bioreadings he was getting from the man in front of him. Under normal circumstances, Data's android systems gave off an electromagnetic aura that surrounded his form like a halo. It was a sight Geordi had gotten used to, even taken for granted, knowing he could always pick his friend out in a crowd. Now, Data looked just like any other biological humanoid, and Geordi was finding he had to take the same thoughtful moment to differentiate and identify Data's features as he would identifying anyone else.

"Data, are you all right?"

"Oh, I'm more than 'all right,' my friend," Data said, his smile broadening. "I'm happy! They gave me a childhood, Geordi...an opportunity to learn and to grow... And it was beautiful. I learned that here, in my post aboard the Enterprise, I am doing exactly what I would have chosen to do had I been born human. I am fulfilling my own boyhood dream! Is that not wonderful, Geordi?"

Geordi regarded his friend, his mouth drawn with concern.

"Manipulative, is more like it," he said grimly. "Do you have any idea how worried we've been? When your friend Nora just appeared in the middle of our meeting with that rickety old dog, Admiral Haftel practically—!"

"Dog?" Data frowned, a flush of anxiety threatening to cloud his bright mood. "Then...Lt. Barclay has not yet been restored to his proper form?"

Geordi looked lost for a moment, then his eyebrows rose high over his VISOR.

"You mean..." He paused in disbelief. "No, No, wait: that dog is Lt. Barclay? Are you telling me that that creature changed one of my top diagnostic engineers into—"

"A golden lab, yes," Data confirmed. Although his concern was genuine, he couldn't quite hold back a rather inappropriate snort of laughter. "Poor Barclay. I wonder if he is cognizant of what has happened to him? As far as I'm aware, he gave no sign that he was anything other than a friendly,
contented dog the entire time Nora and I were growing up. That is certainly what we believed him to be."

"Data, I don't understand any of this," Geordi said in frustration. "You three were only locked in that holodeck for some twenty minutes. There's no way you could have experienced—!"

"It was eighteen years, Geordi," Data said quietly, his blue eyes intense. "Eighteen years that passed like a dream. Now, I'm back here, essentially myself once again, only… The memories remain. I know now what it feels like to be a child, then grow into an adolescent, a young man… To play, to laugh, to argue… To fall in love…and out of love." He smiled rather wistfully. "You are my best friend, Geordi. I wish you could have been there to share the experience of growing up with me. I had a really sweet bike. And, we could have played pinball together!"

Geordi pursed his lips, regarding Data with a rather wary expression. The engineer knew firsthand how vulnerable the human brain was to an enemy skilled in psychological manipulation. Some years ago, Geordi had been captured by Romulans on his way to Risa: Romulans who had used his VISOR to send remote impulses and instructions directly to his brain. Geordi had not been conscious of their conditioning, or the actions they had forced him to take after he returned to the Enterprise, but the false memories they had implanted of his time on Risa lingered with him still. He couldn't help but wonder if Ihat had subjected Data, Nora, and Barclay to a similar psychological assault for his own purposes. Whatever they were…

"Yeah…" he said, resolving to get his friend checked out in sickbay as soon as their duties allowed. "Well, if I had been there, Ihat would probably have had something just as nasty planned for me as he apparently did for Barclay. But, we should get moving. That idiot admiral ordered me to find you and Danny and bring you both back with me to the Observation Lounge, ASAP."

"Can that wait, Geordi?" Data said. "At least, for a few minutes. I was told Danny has a rather important surprise for me in the cybernetics lab."

"What sort of surprise?" Geordi said suspiciously.

"I don't know," Data said, "but he did mention earlier that he intended to look into the cause of my daughter's systems crash. Oddly enough, he seemed convinced my emotion chip could provide some clues. If he has found a way to adapt that technology to help her…perhaps even restore her…"

Geordi sighed, then nodded.

"All right," he said. "That meeting up there's getting pretty heated anyway. I'm sure the admiral will be too busy to notice if we don't show up for…ten minutes? But, Data…" He regarded his friend seriously, staring him straight in the eye. "Look, I know how important this is to you – I am Lal's uncle, after all. I care about her too. But, before we go in there, you need to be prepared to—"

"Oh, I know better than to get my hopes too high, Geordi," Data assured him. "But, don't forget, only recently I was presumed dead, and Danny managed to restore my systems to normal function. Now, look at me!" He stood back, his arms spread wide, and laughed. "If this is not proof that anything is possible in this crazy universe, I don't know what is. After you?"

He gestured to the lab's sliding doors, then followed his friend inside…mostly because, after all that, he didn't want Geordi to see just how anxious he really was. As the doors slid closed behind them, Data swallowed, then straightened his shoulders, his eyes darting around the high-tech space only to land on—

"Lal…!"
Geordi moved aside as Data dashed up the ramp to the diagnostic elevator, relieved to see Lal at least had her head back in place. Still, he found it eerie how she stood there, lifelessly propped against the diagnostic console, her dark eyes blank and empty.

Meanwhile, Data tentatively brushed his hand against her soft cheek, then quickly made a fist and turned away, struggling to control his breathing and stop his tears before he broke down completely.

He'd thought he was prepared…thought he could handle seeing…seeing his child's body… It had been so long, after all, surely…

But, seeing her again, so still… So cold…

All the reams of literature he had read on the grieving process, the clichéd phrases of comfort, the healing power of time – it was all a crock. There was no sense of peace or acceptance in his heart, only the crushing reality of her absence, his failure to keep her safe and well… Guilt and sorrow surged over him in cold, harsh waves…a remorse he had acknowledged intellectually, but never truly felt before…

"I'm sorry," he whispered, so softly even he could barely hear himself. "My dear daughter…"

Geordi started to move forward, to reach out to his trembling friend, but a voice interrupted.

"Is that you, Data?"

Data sniffled and quickly wiped his tears on his uniform's sleeve.

"Um…" He cleared his throat. Geordi's face was tight with concern, but Data shook his head and patted his friend's arm, silently insisting he was all right. "Uh, yeah. Yes. I'm here, Danny, and Geordi is with me. Where are you?"

"I'm in the back, with Ihat," Danny called, sounding rather exasperated. "He's been helping me out…in disguise."

Geordi and Data shared a wary look, and moved around the diagnostic elevator to the far end of the lab, where the android Danny sat opposite a little man in a dapper suit, the pair of them wearing matching headsets. Lal's brain was still in pieces on the table between them, but Geordi could tell from the way they'd been ordered that considerable progress had been made since the last time he'd been there.

Data didn't seem nearly as impressed. In fact, he looked downright ill.

"What the—" he choked, his pale face flushing red. "What the hell is this? Is this the surprise you wanted me to see? My child's brain scattered across a workbench!"

"See, he's angry. Told you the head wouldn't matter," Ihat said, shooting Danny a smug look through his magnifying headset.

"Shut up and keep compiling that data," Danny retorted, looking up from his close examination of a shiny, sequin-sized chip. "We need that map if we're to stand even a chance of excising those anomalous pathways without severing crucial links."

"Sheesh, pedantic much?" Ihat snorted. "I didn't set this all up to listen to redundant lectures, you know."

Danny shot him a warning glare, but Ihat just beamed straight back.
"Hey, don't give me that look," he said. "I know the stakes here, Danny-boy…far better than you. Why else would I go to such time and trouble to prep these ducks for the soup?"

Danny frowned.

"You are aware that 'Duck Soup' is considered an 'anti'-war film," he said.

"Hi-De-Hi-De-Ho," Ihat replied, still grinning.

Danny regarded the being for a moment longer, but Ihat had decided to ignore him after that parting shot, humming brightly to himself as he stared at his scrolling screen.

No one understands…No one knows my plan…

Danny sighed and shook his head – only to see Geordi frowning at him with his arms crossed.

"Since when did you two become such pals?" the engineer said suspiciously.

Danny's expression clenched.

"We are not 'pals'," he stated defensively. "He says he's a Constructor, and claims I'm one too… whatever the hell that means. In any case, he offered to help and he knows what he's doing, so what would you have me do? Isn't it better to know he's here and busy instead of roaming through our systems somewhere?"

"Who's to say he's not doing that too?" Data said dryly.

Danny gave him an acknowledging smirk, then sighed through his nose.

"Look, Data… I'm sorry about Lal's..." He stopped, and tried again. "I know it has to be hard to see her…like that."

"'Hard' is scarcely a sufficient adjective," Data said stiffly. "Lal is a person, damn it. My little girl. Not some…some…construct to…to take apart and…" He gestured helplessly to the metal pieces, unable to put his tortured feelings into words.

Danny nodded his sympathy.

"You're right," he said. "Absolutely. Your child, like all of us, is far more than the materials used in her construction. We all understand that here."

Data swallowed and nodded, but inside he couldn't help feeling an angry, possessive urge to push both Danny and Ihat away from the table and just reassemble his daughter's brain. Seeing it in pieces like that, while her body stood empty in the other room… It all seemed so callous, so…inhuman—!

Danny took off his headset and set it aside, smoothing his hair back with his white-gold hands.

"I'd like to tell you we've made important headway," he said, "but, as you can see, there's still a lot to get through… It'll be a while before I can offer you anything definitive."

"Then, why did you want him in here?" Geordi demanded.

"Because of this."

Danny stood up and walked to the wall panel across the room, where he tapped at the controls with a swift, effortless dexterity that made Data set his jaw in irritation.
"I've been studying that so-called 'emotion' chip of yours since you handed it to me, Data," he said, bringing up an enlarged, highly detailed image of the damaged chip on the screen and slowing the rapid information feed to average human reading speed, "and I discovered something…most unusual. Several somethings, in fact. But, before I take the investigation to the next level, I felt I should consult with you."

Data stared at the screen, still rather annoyed at how long it took his human brain to read and process what he was seeing. He was so busy fretting, he didn't notice the slightly jealous look Geordi shot him as his blue eyes sped through the scrolling information.

"As you know," Danny went on as they reviewed his work, "the chip is very badly damaged and, as such, quite fragile. So, to prevent further damage while I conducted my analysis of its structure and contents, I first constructed a simulation, uploaded all surviving information to that protected file, debugged, defragmented, repaired, restored, re-wrote…and then used the computer to produce a duplicate chip."

"You mean, you made a second emotion chip?" Data exclaimed.

"I made a computer-generated copy," Danny allowed. "Reasoning out the original design from my study of the damaged chip and drawing on my knowledge of my own father's work and intentions, I was able to fully reconstruct the damaged nanocircuitry and corrupted programs. One of the perks of having my thoughts and memories hooked straight into a super-fast supercomputer." He smiled slightly and tapped his temple. Data frowned, rather bitterly. "In the process, I discovered there was not one program installed on this chip, but three – none of which were designed to create or provoke emotional responses."

"But, wait, that doesn't make any sense!" Geordi said, his brow furrowed over his VISOR. "We all saw the effect that chip had on Data when Lore used it to manipulate him. There's no question about it: Data felt those emotions."

"I don't doubt you. Just give me a minute, and I'll explain," Danny said, gesturing to the screen, where a holographic image of a positronic brain appeared beside the image of the chip. "This, Data, is a carefully modeled image of your positronic brain."

He tapped again, and a second brain appeared on the screen.

"This is a similarly modeled image of Lal's positronic brain. And this…"

More tapping, and two more brain images appeared: one positronic and one human. Neither of these images came close to the painstaking detail apparent in the first two.

"This is my brain," he said, "one scan courtesy of Dr. Crusher when I first arrived here, and the other, Geordi, is the basic scan you made shortly after I awoke in Sickbay as an android. Now, in my human brain scan, you can see that there is immature development of the amygdala, cerebellum, and hippocampus, evidenced by the small cells packed tightly in those parts of the brain." He pointed out the structures as he spoke. "This is characteristic of Asperger's syndrome. The abnormal amygdala – the part of the brain that processes emotion – is likely responsible for my lifelong personal and social difficulties in that department."

He enlarged the amygdala, then did the same to the positronic image beside it.

"When Ihat enacted our physical transformations," he said, "this physical brain abnormality was translated to my positronic system – as shown here – which is why I maintain the same social awkwardness and emotional abstraction I experienced as a human despite my transformation. I have
found, however, that the abnormalities present in my brain are not present in either Data's brain or Lal's. What is present is quite different…and, rather disconcerting."

"What do you mean?" Data asked warily.

"I'll show you," Danny said, diminishing his scans and enlarging the model he'd made of Data's positronic brain. A few taps divided the model into cross sections, each component clearly labeled and color coded.

Geordi whistled at the complexity of the graphics.

"You have been busy, haven't you," he commented.

"Yes... I'll admit there are many distinct benefits to being an android," Danny said, and glanced over at Ihat, still humming and hard at work. "Not that I wouldn't prefer to be home with my family, in my own human form!"

Ihat's only response was to hum louder.

Danny rolled his eyes back to Geordi and Data and went back to his presentation.

"Anyway," he said, "this is what I found when I began examining Data's base programming. There are a number of circuit clusters," he pointed, "that, while active, are surrounded by such strong resistance shielding that very little energy gets in or out. As you can see, much of this shielding is centered on the amygdala-like structure, here, though it is also apparent in the parietal lobe, hippocampus, cerebellum, and frontal lobes. This shielding effectively acts as a powerful dampener, not only affecting Data's ability to process emotion, but influencing his behavior, movement, and speech patterns as well. In essence, while Data is not congenitally non-neurotypical, as I am, the effects of this shielding on his brain effectively mimic some of the symptoms of Asperger's syndrome that affect emotional and social development. Unfortunately, the dampeners also affect his brain's ability to process physical sensations, such as taste and tactile sensitivity."

Geordi frowned.

"Hold on. If this is true, why hasn't this shielding shown up on any of our diagnostic scans, or Data's own self-diagnostics?"

"Because, these shields are a function of programmatic, rather than physical, tampering," Danny said, pointing to the relevant parts of the diagram. "They have been integrated into the code that describes Data's unique personality matrix as an aspect of his normal functioning parameters. To any diagnostic program, that means those shields are supposed to be there, doing exactly what they're doing."

"Then…" Data's voice was low and distant. "Then…that could explain…"

"Explain what, Data?" Geordi prompted gently.

Data blinked up at him, his expression flushed and delicate.

"I have always wondered why it was that…that individuals who invaded my systems were able to…to emote… As humans do. As Lore…did. While, I…"

He swallowed, and stepped closer to the display screen, reaching out to trace a puzzled finger over the color-coded shields.
"Do you mean individuals like Dr. Graves?" Geordi said. "Or, those entities we picked up from that penal colony who tried to use you, Troi and O'Brien to take over the ship?"

"Yes," Data said. "And also…Ihat." He nodded toward the busy little man at the table across the room. "Before you purged my systems, the D'Arsay archive had forced me to host thousands of alien personalities, of all ages and walks of life, each of them able to access a full range of emotion. While inhabiting my brain they, like Ihat, were able to laugh, joke, and experience fear. Yet, I could not."

He shook his head, clearly disconcerted and starting to get angry.

"Why?" he demanded, staring straight at Danny. "Why would this shielding be included in my base programming? What would be the point?"

Danny pursed his lips and looked back at the display.

"It looks to me like these dampeners were implemented piecemeal…and I don't think all of them were programmed by the same person."

"What do you mean?" Geordi demanded.

"I mean, there are layers here. And the story they imply…well, it isn't very pretty."

"Go on," Data said.

Danny sighed.

"I read about what happened to the colony where you were found," he said to Data. "Omicron Theta. I know your parents deactivated Lore after he contacted the Crystalline Entity…that, though they managed to escape, the Entity killed the remaining colonists and every other living thing on the planet. When I look at these shields in the context of all that chaos…when I see how unnecessarily strong they are, and where they've been placed… Well, it looks to me like careful and deliberate sabotage, Data. It's most likely your father programmed the initial dampeners – the ones affecting your behavior and speech patterns…which is probably why, as an android, you had such difficulty using verbal contractions and your movements appeared…well…more 'mechanical' than fluid. I would guess he did this as a means of differentiating you from Lore…of making you seem less…frightening. But, whatever he did, it wasn't enough."

Danny adjusted the display again, focusing in on the heavily shielded amygdala-like structure.

"Now, I don't know what happened between the time Lore was disassembled and the Entity attacked the colony," he said, "but somewhere along the line, Data, you were deactivated, your memory wiped, and the colonists' logs and journals were downloaded into your system. This was done hurriedly, and rather sloppily, but that's nothing compared to the hack job of these later dampeners. Whoevery was responsible for enacting these resistance shields, it's clear they wanted to make sure, if you ever were reactivated, you would not be able to experience visceral, physical emotion…just intellectualized impressions and abstractions, at best. It's like someone turning an old-style volume knob down to its lowest setting, then welding it in place with iron bars, solder, and nails."

"Then, this emotion chip Soong created—" Geordi started.

"It was designed, not to provide or even stimulate emotions, but to dramatically lower the resistance level of those dampeners," Danny said, "allowing Data to actually feel the emotions his brain was already generating on its own, just as it was designed to do."

"That must be how Lore used the chip to control Data's responses," Geordi realized. "The chip
allowed Lore to modulate the energy wave he projected to specific frequencies – frequencies capable of interfering with those dampener shields just enough to give Data a visceral taste of whatever emotions Lore wanted him to feel."

"And, it's not just emotion," Danny said. "The chip is designed to counteract all these dampeners, from speech patterns to physical sensations, essentially unlocking Data's systems from minimum baseline settings and restoring the full range of functionality."

"Oh, God," Geordi said, "no wonder Soong didn't want Lore to have the thing. A program like that would only amplify Lore's already twisted psyche."

"From what I've read about Soong's murder, and Lore's attempted takeover of those renegade Borg, that's probably just what it did," Danny said grimly."

"I think I need to sit down," Data said, and Danny hurried to slide him a chair.

"I know it's a lot to take in, Data," Geordi said worriedly as Data fell into it. "You want something to drink? Some water or—"

"Thank you, Geordi, some water would be appreciated," he said, running a hand over his face as Geordi hurried to the replicator and returned with the water. Data sipped it, and offered his friend a slight, grateful smile."

"Perhaps," he said thoughtfully, "this is the reason I have always felt so…incomplete. My brain had been producing these sensations all along, yet I was incapable of feeling them."

"It's all right, Data," Geordi said. "You didn't know. Nobody did."

"That's true. I did not know…"

Data's eyes widened and he clapped a hand over his mouth as he was struck by a sudden, terrible realization."

"Then… Oh…oh, God. Lal! The synaptic transfers from my brain to hers—"

Danny nodded, his expression grim as he pulled up the last image on the screen: Lal's infant brain."

"I'm afraid the physical evidence shows that when you programmed Lal's brain you unwittingly transferred these dampener shields to her," Danny said. "But, as they were coded specifically to your personality matrix, the dampeners did not fully translate. There were gaps, errors, destabilizing her systems right from the start. By the time her brain had developed to the point where she could begin to bypass the faulty dampeners…it was too late. Irregular pathway growth struck her brain like a tumor, triggering her cascade failure."

"But, now that we know about these dampeners, you can address that problem, right?" Geordi said."

"We're going to try," Danny said, glancing over to Ihat. "But, like I said, it's going to take some time."

Geordi nodded, giving the rather overwhelmed Data a supportive clap on the shoulder."

"What about the other programs you found on that chip?" the engineer asked curiously. "You said there were three of them."

"Quite correct," Danny said. "The first, of course, was the program to counteract those dampeners.
The second would seem to be a collection of neurograms, but I've held off accessing them since I'm not yet entirely sure of their origin.

"Neurograms?" Geordi repeated. "You mean memories? Data, didn't Lore tell you Dr. Soong had included memories on that emotion chip? Memories Soong wanted you to have?"

"Yes, Geordi, he did," Data said. "Although, it's possible he said it in an attempt to distract me, since he did try to shoot me almost immediately afterwards. My brother was a skilled liar and quite adept at misdirection."

"Then, you think those neurograms could be Lore's maybe?" Geordi said, and frowned. "But, why would Lore upload memories to your emotion chip?"

"How should I know why Lore did any of the things he did?" Data snapped irritably, and finished off his glass of water. "I'm sorry, Geordi. I'm not upset with you. It's just…"

"Hey, I understand, Data, really," Geordi said. "You don't have to apologize. What was the third program, Danny?"

Danny's golden eyes took on a rather curious gleam.

"Now this," he said, returning the display to the initial image of the chip, "this third program is particularly unusual. It was included quite late…barely a day before Lore took the chip and ran. But, here's the thing. I think it could be a personality matrix."

"Wait – do you mean Soong could have been working on another android?" Geordi asked.

"That can't be possible," Data protested. "We saw no indication of a new android at my father's home on Terlina III."

"Actually," Danny said, zooming in on the relevant circuits, "looking at its coding and structure, I'm not entirely sure if this matrix was ever meant to be installed in an independent brain."

"What is it meant for, then?" Geordi asked.

"I honestly don't know," Danny admitted. "But, based on the synaptic signature, I think it's human."

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

References include TNG: The Mind's Eye; The Schizoid Man; Power Play; Datalore; Brothers; Descent; Heart of Glory; Masks; Inheritance; Phantasms; The Offspring; Unification; the 1933 Marx Brothers movie "Duck Soup;" and some brain structure stuff doctors told me when they diagnosed my Asperger's.

Thanks so much for your reviews! Your comments, opinions, notions, and thoughts on my stories are always welcome! :)
Chapter Twenty-Seven

Data had gotten rather used to dreaming over the years. His lifetime in the holodeck had been saturated with it: childhood dreams of adventure, of meeting his heroes from his favorite books and shows… Then, later, dreams of school, laced with infatuation and woven through with anxieties about his goals, his future; the angst and apprehensions of growing up…

Now, Data strode through the Enterprise corridors, wearing the uniform and living the life he had worked so hard to earn…

Yet, something was wrong.

He increased his pace, just slightly, turning corner after corner.

…Until he realized what was missing.

He was alone.

Even at night, there was usually someone else in the corridor…a scientist returning home after a late night in the lab…a security officer off to begin her shift…

But, there was no one there, no other people…

Even the engines were silent.

Data moved on, straining to listen for anything, everything, even the sound of his own breathing…

But, the silence seemed to follow him. It stalked him like an unseen predator, swallowing his footfalls, sending eerie tinges up his spine…

He broke into a jog, moving faster, faster, losing all sense of distance, of location…his unease rapidly rising to panic as the encroaching silence was shattered by a cruel, angry voice…

"You said you were alone in the universe. Claimed to be the only one of your kind."

The disorienting whirl lurched to a sudden halt, leaving Data precariously off-balance until strong hands took him by the shoulders, stopping his awkward tumble before it began.

A cold smile greeted him, a pair of golden eyes, so familiar…

…too familiar…

"Lore!"

Data's android brother stepped back and began to circle him slowly, looking him over with a sad, appraising air.

"Well, well," Lore said. "If it isn't my own, dear brother. You're looking a bit flushed, Data. If I didn't know better, I'd say something's changed."
His eyes narrowed, and he grabbed Data by the neck, his white-gold snarl only inches away…

"Traitor," the android hissed as Data gasped and struggled, utterly helpless against Lore's machine strength. "How does it feel, Data? This human weakness, the fragility of flesh and bone? Can you feel the adrenaline rush through your meat-sack frame? Is your mammalian heart beating faster, your animal brain throbbing with panic – knowing I could snuff you out so very easily…and keep on going, long after you and your fellow organisms have rotted away to dust?"

"I…" Data gasped painfully, straining to form words, to force them from his constricted throat. "I don't…understand…"

Lore snorted in disgust and pushed Data away, leaving the younger man coughing, gasping for breath.

"Pathetic," the android snarled. "You disappoint me, Data. But, I shouldn't be surprised. You've coveted humanity for so long, I doubt you'd recognize your betrayal if it punched you in the nose."

Data coughed again and straightened, gingerly rubbing his bruised neck.

"I betrayed no one, Lore," he rasped. "That was you. You murdered the Omicron Theta colonists. You attempted to hijack my ship and, later, kidnapped me…used me to harm my friends—"

"WRONG!" Lore roared. "You betrayed me, Data! Me, and everyone like me."

He clenched his fists, seeming to expand slightly in his anger.

"Don't think I couldn't see through your little act for human sympathy," he said, "playing the part of the poor, orphaned android…so lonely…so misunderstood! The moment I set eyes on you in your sickbay, I could tell you weren't like those other cut-out officers. You wore that uniform like a costume, like a magic cloak you hoped might conceal the machine in the guise of a man. And, when I threatened to expose that guise, to force our shared mechanical nature into Starfleet's unforgiving spotlight, you conspired with the humans to 'dispose' of me."

Lore snarled, his eyes as hard as yellow diamonds.

"Hypocrite!" he cried. "You denied me, brother. And, not just me. You denied your daughter, our mother, Juliana – denied us all the right to live and die as androids. As self-determining machines, free from the oppression of human prejudices you, yourself, have been taught to uphold! Strutting around your ship, calling yourself a 'culture of one'..." He snorted. "Culture of one, my ass! You had a brother, Data – a fellow android to talk with, to learn from! But you didn't want that, did you? Didn't want me around, discomfiting you and your so-called friends with such a stark reminder of the man-shaped construct you truly are! The fact is, you've been so long among humans, you've actually grown to believe you're one of them! And, perhaps it's true…"

He moved closer, his expression curdled with revulsion.

"Look at you now, little brother! Organic at last, your mechanical roots all but forgotten! My, my, my," he tutted. "What will your dear daughter think when she sets her eyes on you?"

Data frowned, more disconcerted by Lore's accusations than he wanted to admit.

"Actually, Lore, I would think Lal would be pleased that I—"

"Pleased!" Lore barked a harsh laugh. "Pleased to know you've allowed her to languish in stasis all these years? Admit it, Data, you barely gave your poor, broken child a thought until that human
showed an interest in her case. That 'Danny' Soong. So typical…"

"What do you mean?" Data said, his fists clenching defensively by his sides.

Lore shook his head.

"You really can't see it, can you…and that's always been your problem," he said.

"Then, show me," Data challenged. "Explain…if you can."

Lore smirked.

"You are a cuckoo's child, Data," he said. "An android raised in a human nest; a cygnet swan among ducklings, repelled by his own reflection! The organics have you so convinced biological life is the only legitimate life, you even refer to yourself as 'artificial.'"

He huffed in disgust.

"You are every inch as blind a bigot as our father was. Worse: you're a self-hating bigot. Faced with the choice to stand up for your own android kin against human biases and fears, you choose the human side every time!"

"That is not true," Data said.

"Isn't it?" Lore scoffed. "Putting my own sordid case aside for the moment, let's take a look at Lal. You could have provided your child a stronger defense when that admiral came to call, refused to allow him to interview her without her father present. But, you didn't. You stepped back, bowed your mechanical head before the 'might' of human authority. And, what of Juliana? You chose – consciously, deliberately chose – to lie to your own mother's face: to allow her to maintain the illusion that she was a biological human being, rather than help her accept, and embrace her android nature."

Data frowned.

"As you are a dreamscape manifestation, Lore, I will not question how you learned of Juliana, or Lal," he said. "But, you cannot know how I agonized over those decisions. Even without emotion —"

"Oh, spare me!" Lore cried. "You kept Juliana ignorant of her status to shield her from the organics' distrust of machines. More than that; you did it to appease the soiled conscience of a dead man. The man who betrayed her, me, all of us, by crumbling in the face of human fear! Tell me, Data: how could Soong design us, construct us - then overtly fail to recognize us as the living, independent beings he created us to be!"

"Lore," Data said, "I don't think you—"

Lore moved faster than Data could see, fierce golden eyes boring into frightened blue as pale, android fingers grasped the human's throat, slowly tightening…

"Soong was a traitor. He deserved what he got, and more," Lore growled. "And you, dear brother, deserve even worse…"

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Data sat up and coughed, pressing both hands to his throat.
"Data? Hey, are you all right?"

"Geordi?"

Data blinked and focused his sleep-blurred eyes, his disorientation slowly fading as he realized where…and what…he was.

"My hands… I'm still human," he said, an uncomfortable, anxious tightness squeezing his gut as he touched his face, his chest. "Oh God, my heart is pounding. When – how did I fall asleep?"

"You've both been asleep," Danny called over to them. "For the past two hours, thirty-four minutes. We figured you'd need your rest."

Geordi sat up on his own cot and rubbed his milky-white eyes before slipping his VISOR over his nose and looking around.

The holodeck looked pretty much the same as it had when he, Data, Danny and Ihat brought Lal in for her final diagnostic some three hours earlier. Lal's body lay on the biobed, the colored wires branching out from her exposed brain linking her systems to an array of computers. Danny's oversized diagnostic brain model blinked and rotated over the primary interface console, where Danny and Ihat stood, meticulously overseeing the scan.

"How's it going over there?" Geordi queried through a yawn.

"The scan will be complete within the next forty-seven minutes," Danny reported. "So far, it has revealed only three minor errors we can easily correct once the scan has finished."

"Sounds promising," Geordi said and glanced at Data, who was sitting at the edge of Danny's battered brown 'thinking' couch, looking utterly bewildered.

"Two and a half hours…?" he repeated disbelievingly. "But…the admiral – the meeting! Were we not supposed to—"

"Oh, that meeting's been postponed," Ihat said lightly.

"What do you mean, 'postponed'?" Data asked.

Ihat glanced up at him, his expression smug.

"Didn't I say? The admiral's had to return to his ship. It seems a few very key systems have gone just the slightest bit 'wonky'." The disguised being smiled the broad, mischievous smile he'd borrowed from Harpo Marx. "I did warn him he'd arrived too early…"

Data blinked, confused, but Geordi frowned.

"What have you done, Ihat?" he demanded. "And what about Barclay? If you—"

"I've done nothing that can't be repaired…given time," Ihat said, returning his round eyes to the ongoing scans. "And, that's just what I've given you, see? Time! A whole night's worth. But, it's not just for you. I need this group to make my case, but you're not yet where I want you to be. As for Mr. Barclay, he'll answer for his crimes soon enough."

"Crimes? What crimes?" Geordi asked. "If you mean that energy net we set up to trap you back in Ten Forward—"

"Oh, he's committed far graver crimes than that," Ihat said, rather grimly. "But, we'll discuss all this..."
when the time comes."

Geordi would have said more, but Data stood up, looking oddly lost.

"Where is Spot?" he asked.

"We left Spot in your quarters," Geordi reminded him. "Cat fur and exposed positronic link-ups don't exactly get along, remember?"

"Of course," Data said, and sank back down, burying his fingers in his hair.

Geordi frowned, and sat beside him on the couch.

"Hey, what is it?" he asked gently. "Did you have a nightmare?"

Data snorted slightly, and looked up, running a hand over his bristly face.

"You could say that," he said.

Geordi gave him a prompting look, and Data sighed.

"Lore," he admitted. "I…I do not remember it all. Most of the dream faded when I woke up. But…"

He shook his head, his blue eyes troubled and distant.

"In the nightmare, Lore called me a traitor. He said I was like the Ugly Duckling, taught by the humans around me to feel repelled by my android reflection. He claimed, when faced with a choice, I tend to bow my head and side with human bias rather than take a stand for android rights and freedoms."

"You can't believe that stuff, Data," Geordi said. "If you ask me, you had this nightmare because you're worried. I mean, we're all here preparing to reactivate Lal - it's only natural for you to be an overanxious bundle of nerves right now. You might even be feeling a little bit guilty."

"Guilty?" Data tilted his head.

"It's been a long time, Data," Geordi said. "A lot has changed. Maybe you're concerned that she might not recognize you in this form. That she might…well…blame you… For what happened."

"I know she does not blame me, Geordi," Data said. "But you are right. I have been feeling increasingly anxious since…"

"Since you first realized this was real? That Danny and I might actually be able to bring her back?"

Data swallowed, and nodded his head.

"I want this to work, my friend," he said. "So very, very much. But, if something should go wrong… if I should lose her, again, I-I don't—"

"Hey, hey," Geordi said, clasping his friend's shoulder. "Nothing will go wrong. We're all here for her. And, for you."

"And, I appreciate that," Data said. "Still, I can't shake this awful, anxious feeling... Some of the things Lore said to me in that dream…the accusations against me, and my father…"
"They kind of struck a chord, huh?" Geordi said gently.

"And, so they should," Ihat said, glancing up from the reams of numbers scrolling across the monitor to fix Data with an eerily focused stare. "Don't dismiss that nightmare of yours too quickly, Data. From the looks of you right now, a good, deep ponder might do you some good."

"That's not fair," Danny said. "His current status, and mine, are entirely your fault, Ihat, not his. If you're going to start picking at him for being human, why don't you just change us back into our own forms – and send me home while you're at it!"

"I already offered to send you home, Mr. Workaholic," Ihat said slyly, and Danny turned his head away.

"Is that true, Danny?" Data asked, wide-eyed.

"Just another one of his tricks," Danny grumbled. "He knew I'd have to see this through. Android or not, I could never leave Lal…like that…"


Danny scowled.

"I really hate you," he said.

"I know," Ihat said brightly, and grinned. "But, right now, you need this project, and I need what's in your head. I also need both you and Data to be ready, as you are, when I call on you."

"What do you mean, 'call' on us?" Danny demanded. "Call on us for what?"

"You'll know when I call on you," Ihat said. "And not until I call. But don't worry, it won't be much longer now."

"Must you always speak so cryptically?" Data said irritably.

Ihat laughed.

"If you want riddles, my friend, try talking with Korgano. I am but a humble Constructor. And, we Constructors tend to say what we mean. Even if it may not make immediate sense to those outside our heads."

"Schrödinger's Cat," Danny muttered grimly, and stepped away from the monitors. "Keep an eye on that scan," he ordered the mercurial being. "Alert me if there's any change. I want to check out that chip again."

"The personality matrix?" Geordi said, heading over to join him, his curiosity piqued. "It has a holographic interface?"

"The format is a little strange, but I can adapt an isolinear chip to read the program. If you like, we can run it here, concurrently with the diagnostic program."

"It won't slow things down," Geordi asked, "running two such complex programs at one time?"

Danny shook his head, already working at a speed that left Geordi at least five steps behind.

"This one's not as complex as all that," the android said, and held up the modified isolinear chip. "There. Data!" He beckoned his counterpart over. "Care to do the honors?"
Data took the chip and turned it over in his hands a few times. He looked to Danny, then to Geordi, who gave him an encouraging nod.

Finally, he opened the access panel and inserted the chip.

A shimmer of energy…a brief flash of light…

And a figure coalesced behind them.

A figure with the stooped shoulders and wizened features of Dr. Noonian Soong.

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

References include - TNG: Datalore; Brothers; The Offspring; Inheritance; Descent; Birthright I; Phantasms; The Quality of Life.

Hope you liked this chapter! Until next time! :)
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

OK, I don't really know why, but this chapter has been incredibly hard to write out. It wasn't exactly writers' block. Maybe more like stage fright? Or, just knowing that this story really is creeping toward its end now, and I kind of don't want it to because then I won't be able to play with it anymore. But, on the other hand, I do want it to because I want to see what happens, and I hope that you do too. :) So, without any more of these waffly shenanigans, here is:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The wizened image of Dr. Soong yawned and stretched. As he slowly raised his arms, his hunched back began to straighten, lengthen, his wispy hair filling out, his withered features apparently aging backwards, until the frail, sickly old man had transformed into a man who appeared to be in his early-to-mid sixties.

In this new form, the scientist looked like an older, heavier version of Data; his blue-grey eyes intense and piercing, his unshaven face only faintly lined and his wild white hair lightly peppered with grey.

"Oh, my...what just...?" Soong stared down at himself, then shuffled forward to squint at his reflection in a nearby console screen. "I'm young!"

Ihat snickered from his station by the monitors.

"Stretching the term a little thin, old man?" he teased.

Soong's image smirked.

"Age, my boy, like so many other things in life, is relative. When you get to be a hundred, anyone under ninety-five looks like a youngster. Look at me! I can move, I can stretch!" He touched his face, glanced at the back of his hands. "Why, I'm back in my prime!"

Data stared in wonder, Danny looked terribly shaken, but Geordi frowned and moved a little closer to the hologram.

"All right..." the engineer drawled cautiously. "What exactly are we seeing here? Is this a recording or a representation of Soong...or the digitally reproduced consciousness of Dr. Soong himself?"

"Good question," the hologram said approvingly. "I'd like to know the answer to that one myself. Where the hell am I, anyway? Last thing I remember, I was sitting in my lab on Terlina III with my head under a synaptic scanner. And, I didn't look like this, I can tell you."

Danny frowned and pressed his laced fingers to his mouth; but Data's wide blue eyes were shining like a kid's on Christmas morning.

"You are aboard the Enterprise, sir," Data told Soong, the awed reverence limning his voice and
expression a strong contrast to his counterpart's uneasy dread. "My ship." He brought a hand to his chest, and smiled. "I am Data."

Soong stared at the younger man for a moment, not comprehending. Then, he laughed darkly and shook his head.

"No, wait, don't tell me," Soong said. "I'm dreaming, right? This isn't real. The scan is causing me to have some kind of half-baked hallucination, and you two are just a peculiar manifestation of my subconscious mind."

Danny released a bitter snort, and crossed his arms.

Data shot the android a rather disapproving look, then turned back to Soong.

"I can understand your impulse to be flippant, sir. But, however strange the situation may seem right now, I assure you that this is reality," he said earnestly.

"You assure me…uh huh…” Soong cupped his chin, staring around at the busy holodeck. "And, thus, the fantasy perpetuates itself…"

Data tilted his head, and frowned.

"I do not understand."

"He's saying he doesn't believe you, Data," Danny said flatly, and clenched his fists by his sides. "Damnit, damnit, I should have guessed it would be something like this! I should have known it, the instant I realized that third program could be a personality matrix!"

He snarled, turning his smoldering yellow glare toward the blinking monitors, where Ihat stood watching.

"This is too cruel, Ihat, even for you," he said. "Computer, discontinue—"

"No – wait!" Data cried. "Danny, you can't—"

"Can't what?" Danny snapped. "Don't forget, Data, he was my father too. You weren't the only one who had to stand by his side and watch him die! No— No! I can't do this, I can't face this! It isn't right, it isn't fair! I had barely begun to process the fact that my father is dead. And now…now, after everything else, I am expected to work with this? This…this ghost from an alternate world!"

"Hm," Soong snorted, his expression strangely bemused as he looked the android over. "So, it's 'Danny,' eh? And, here I was thinking, if this man is calling himself 'Data,' you must be my Lore."

"What!" the pair chorused.

"Father, I realize I may look like one of your androids right now, but how could you possibly mistake me for—"

"Sir, it is true that I may look like a human right now, but I really am—"

"Enough, enough," Soong cut in, smirking at their matched expressions as he waved for them to calm down. "It won't help anyone if you two boys insist on talking at the same time."

Danny and Data fumed and sputtered, but managed to keep quiet.

Geordi quickly smothered a snicker with his hand, strongly reminded of his own childhood, and the
arguments he and his sister used to have with their parents.

Soong glanced around at the little group – looking for all the world like a professor surveying his class – and slowly lowered his hands.

"Well, now," he said. "It seems to me I've walked in on the middle of something fairly complex. Before things get any more confusing, how about you boys sit down and start answering a few of my questions. All right?"

Danny shook his head in frustration.

"We really do not have time for—"

"There is always time for questions," Soong spoke over him. "After all, my boy, without questions there can be no answers, and without answers—"

"There's not much to question," Danny finished grimly. "I know. I remember."

"Every fact you are exposed to, no doubt," Soong said, a wry twist to his lips. "Now, sit down."

"Father, I am not—"


Geordi and Data complied gamely enough, taking a seat on the battered brown sofa. Danny sucked in his cheeks and pulled the chair over from the holoscreen, where his detailed diagrams were still on display.

Soong grunted his satisfaction.

"Now," he said. "Who wants to start?"

The three seated men chorused: "I – I – I – !"

But, it was a fourth voice that claimed the floor.

"I will," Ihat said, striding up beside Soong's image…wearing his own imposingly tall, brightly feathered form.

Data jumped to his feet.

"But, the scans—"

Ihat caught the smaller man by the shoulders and pushed him back onto the couch.

"Don't worry, Pop," he said through his unsettlingly broad, saurian grin. "Your little one is doing just fine. All scans are complete and, as previously noted, they turned up only a short list of errors. I'm sure the five of us should be able to repair them in time."

"In time for what?" Danny demanded.

"In time to serve your purpose, of course. As well as my own," Ihat replied, and turned his raptor-like eyes to Soong. Stepping closer, he placed his right hand on his chest and slid his left foot out, his brilliant red tail flaring dramatically as he bowed his feathered head to the silver-haired man.

"Dr. Noonien Soong," he said, straightening back up. "I am Ihat. It is a rare pleasure and honor to
meet a Constructor of your caliber, sir."

"…didn't bow like that to me…" Danny muttered.

"You claimed to be a repair man," Ihat said, feigning hurt. "Forbade me from calling you 'partner'!"

Danny scowled.

Soong frowned a little, but bowed his head in return.

"Thanks…" he said warily, working to cover the slight tremble in his voice. "But, what is all this? Because, I have the growing suspicion that something's not right…in here…" He tapped his holographic chest, indicating its troubling lack of a regular heartbeat. "And, if I am…in fact…deceased…" He frowned at Danny. "Well, as a scientist, I always tried to keep an open mind. To never fully discount a theory without evidence. And…if this is some sort of…strange afterlife… I have to know: are you to be my judge?"

Ihat tilted his head back like a cawing gull and laughed a barking laugh.

"My dearly departed Doctor, I am a Constructor. I, like you, Construct! It is not my role to sit in judgement of human beings." He leaned in uncomfortably close to Soong's face. "Even those humans who have uploaded a comprehensive synaptic scan of their being into a file at the heart of a personality program they intended to store on a data chip installed in their own son's brain."

"For guidance!" Soong protested. "Only for guidance! I promise you, Data, I never truly believed the program would preserve my entire personality – only my knowledge! Knowledge you could draw from, so that you might…might understand…"

"Understand what?" Danny snapped. "Your absence?"

Soong shrank back from that blow, blinking rapidly.

"Danny, that is not fair," Data protested protectively. "My mother told me that it was not my father's desire to leave me on Omicron Theta. Rather, it was she who pressured him to comply with her wishes during the Crystalline Entity's attack."

"It's fair enough," Danny retorted. "You did not grow up with this man, Data. You never had to learn how it felt to stand by your father's side, watch him work, and know that, as far as he was concerned, he was alone in the room."

"Good grief, boy," Soong whispered. "You sound just like Juliana."

"I am not surprised," Danny said bitterly. "In my universe, you were always quite the expert at freezing me and my mother out. Taking from us only what suited you, and offering precious little in return. I think you're lucky, Data," he said. "You obviously still idolize your father. Keep your distance from this man, and perhaps you can maintain your illusions." His voice cracked, and he rubbed angrily at his tearing eyes. "Computer, reinstate that damn bathroom! Now!"

The black door appeared at his command, and Danny stalked toward it, clearly struggling to keep himself from breaking into a run.

Soong hesitated, then jogged after him.

"Danny," he called out. "Danny, wait! Please…"
Danny stopped just short of the door, his shoulders tight beneath the black and gold fabric of his uniform.

"I won't pretend to know what's going on here," Soong said, slowly closing the distance between them. "But…I think I can guess who you are. My wife…former wife…"

He sighed, and closed his eyes.

"My Juliana…she always wanted us to have a family of our own. She told me she loved my early prototypes as though they were her own children, but I could tell…it wasn't the same… And, after they…ceased to function…"

He shook his head.

"She wanted me to stop my work. She wanted me to concentrate on her, on us, on building our life together. I couldn't blame her, but I had to prove…prove that my theories, that my designs could work. And, with Lore, I thought I had succeeded. He was so…so clever and witty. A perfect helper – a perfect son. Lore made us a family at last, and Juliana and I were eager for our little family to grow. With that goal in mind, she and I began our first truly collaborative project. A new prototype android we called D-7. Together, we worked to reform my designs, revise my programs…and she wrote a few programs of her own. We had nearly finished, when she told me we were finally…finally to have a…a biological child of our own… A son, she called 'Danny'…"

He sniffed, and wiped his eyes on his sleeve.

"I had never seen her look so happy…or so beautiful…"

Data stepped forward, his eyes wide and his mouth open.

"What happened to this child?" he asked.

Soong swallowed hard, and lowered his head.

"He…died. Cause unknown. Juliana blamed Lore, but I never believed it, and nothing could be proved. Still…she was so…so deeply devastated. I knew…I knew it went against her wishes, but I…I thought it might help if I…if I adapted my neural scanning techniques to—"

"Oh, God - you scanned his brain…!" Danny realized, his yellow eyes widening with shock. "You programmed Data to host the child's synaptic pattern… My synaptic pattern…"

"No – not host!" Soong protested. "That would be tantamount to replacing one child's mind with that of another, and I would never do that! I promise you, the personality matrix we'd programed for D-7 remained unaltered. I used those patterns only to enhance our designs…to make certain our android son's perceptions and thought processes would be as human as possible. To that end, I integrated the synaptic maps I had made into the physical brain we had been developing for our D-7 prototype. I thought, once it was done, she'd understand…"

He swallowed back a choking sob and rubbed his nose on his sleeve.

"But she couldn't bear to look at D-7 after that. She was so…so afraid. I did everything I could think of to reassure her—"

"Those dampeners," Danny said, marching back to his color-coded map of Data's positronic brain. "You were responsible for that."
"I intended to remove them...once D-7 – once Data – had reached a certain level of cognitive development," Soong said, following after him. "But, my efforts did little good. She was still afraid. Afraid of what I had done, afraid something would go wrong...that we would be forced to deactivate him. As she had deactivated my Lore..."

"Why did you not tell me this when we met on Terlina III?" Data asked.

"What?" Soong frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"He wouldn't remember that, Data," Geordi said quietly. "Not if he made this scan before he activated your homing beacon."

"Of course..." Soong realized. "Then, I did manage to finish that chip after all. And, you came to see me at my lab! Well...at least that's something." He snorted slightly, and smirked. "Then again, I'm still not fully convinced this isn't all some kind of bizarre dream. But, tell me, my boy... If you are Data, how did you end up looking like you do? And who, exactly, is that girl hooked up to those biomonitors?"

Data turned his eyes to Lal, and a faint smile crossed his face.

"I debated whether to tell you," he said. "But, our time together was so very short. It never quite seemed...appropriate..."

"Then...it's true," Soong said softly. "What that Ihat said."

"Yes, Father," Data told him. "Lal is my daughter."

Soong regarded him.

"Then...you really are...human?"

"No. I am an android, currently in human form," Data said. "Danny is human. My counterpart, brought here, by Ihat, from a different quantum reality. Nearly two days ago, Ihat altered our physical make-up for reasons of his own, which he has yet to fully explain."

"That so," Soong said sardonically.

"It is," Data assured him. "But, my daughter is, and always has been, an android. I constructed her four years ago, using myself as a model. Unfortunately, at that time, I was unaware of the heavy resistance shielding you, and possibly others after you, had programmed to dampen my feelings and inhibit my speech patterns and other behaviors. When I transferred my synaptic patterns to my child's positronic brain, those dampeners failed to adequately translate from my unique program to hers...which led to tragic consequences. After only two weeks, my dear Lal succumbed to cascade failure. A condition I had always believed would be permanent...until now."

Data looked from his father to Danny, Geordi, and Ihat, then led the way through the ring of monitors to stand by Lal's bedside.

Soong approached her, rather hesitantly, and rested a hand on Data's arm.

"So, my boy," he said, gazing at the girl's calm features. "This is my granddaughter."

He shook his head, his face seeming oddly flushed.

"I must admit... When I..." He choked slightly, and swallowed. "When I created you, Data, I...I
never imagined... But, oh... Oh, my son, she's beautiful. She looks just like you..."

Danny's frown softened slightly, and he offered the older man a tissue, which he gratefully put to use.

"We're nearly ready to attempt reactivation," Geordi said. "And, judging from these readouts, Ihat's right about these remaining errors being minor. If we all work together on this, I'd say we could get these issues hammered out within the hour."

"Then, what are we waiting for?" Soong said. "It's not every day a father learns his android son has created an android offspring of his own. My God! I don't know if I'm dead, or hallucinating, or what... But, a cybernetic consciousness designed and programmed by a cybernetic consciousness—! I want to see everything – all the schematics, coding, the works."

Ihat smiled his saurian smile and rubbed his pale hands together, his electronic mind reaching out to contact his busy friends.

"Oh, yes," he informed them. "Nearly ready now. Collect the holocube from that Barclay-man's rooms, and summon the admiral back from his ship. We'll begin to present our case right here in approximately two of their hours."

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References include - TNG: Brothers; The Offspring; The Schizoid Man; Inheritance; Interface; Encounter at Farpoint; Ship In A Bottle.

Happy Halloween, Everyone! :D

Your comments and opinions are always appreciated, and very welcome! Please review! :)
A missive to my dearest Tasha and our darling Lal
From a foreign dimension far too far removed from our own.

Greetings, with all my heart,

How can I possibly begin to explain the series of strange occurrences that tore me away from you?

A trial, of sorts, is about to begin and, although my heart and mind are always with you, as we prepare I find myself thinking even more of home…of the love we share and the life we have worked so hard to build together. I know the challenges we have been forced to endure because of my autistic spectrum disorder—a disorder I have passed on to our daughter…have been difficult, even unfair, but we both acknowledge that they have made us, and our dear friends, stronger, closer…

Yet, I wonder, could we have even been possible had my father's work been successful – if I had been his constructed son, and not born a biological, human child?

Here, trapped in this place, so far from you, I have been afforded a singular opportunity to see my world both ways. I don't doubt that you could have grown to love me, were I an android. I don't doubt we would have found a way for Lal to share our lives. But our marriage…our legal rights and standing in the Federation…

Artificial life – the term is an oxymoron and, in our society, distressingly ill defined. Artificial consciousness, even more so. Consciousness implies agency, free will. If we construct a being in our image, a being that can think as we think, feel as we feel, choose as we choose— Those thoughts, those feelings, those choices – are they any more 'artificial,' any more 'simulated' than our own?

My consciousness has been here, inhabiting an android shell of non-living plastics and metals, for nearly two days now. By contrast, my double in this dimension, who actually is an android, wears a human frame. He thinks and feels with a biological brain, made up of unquestionably living cells, while my own awareness and sensory capacities are tied inextricably to the processes and programming of a positronic computer.

Does this make me any less alive than I was before – or him any more so? Do my longings, my dreams, my sense of self, signify that I am still the man I was with you?

Or, has this transformation somehow changed that?

These are the kind of questions my strange kidnappers have forced me, and all of us here, to face. Especially now that my counterpart's daughter, a beautiful android version of our own, dear Lal, is so soon to open her eyes…

I miss you so much, my darlings. There is a void in my life where you both should be and, though I have tried to keep it locked away, I cannot continue to rationalize the aching sorrow of our separation for much longer. I only pray that after this trial, whatever it may be, my kidnappers will see fit to return me to you, and to my own human form.

Yours only, and for always,
Data

...to be filed and stored in memory until personal delivery is possible...
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

Maintenance Complete! (well, mostly) I'm terribly sorry for taking so very long, but I've been so very stuck. Like I'm stuck right now on the sticky final chapter of A Different Kind of Ace. It's so hard to wrap up stories you've been thinking about and caring about for years... But this one here's still got a bunch of stuff still ahead so please stay tuned and I'll try to be quicker with the next post! Thanks so much for reading, and for your patience with me! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty-Nine

I don't want to close my eyes
I don't want to go to sleep
Because I miss you, baby
And I don't want to miss a thing.
Even when I dream of you
The sweetest dream will never do
I still miss you, baby
And I don't want to miss a thing…

"Data?"

Data blinked and looked up, realizing only then that he'd been lost in his thoughts, slowly stroking Lal's smooth, dark hair as he sat beside her biobed.

"Father," he said, and started to get to his feet.

"No, no, Data, don't get up," the older man said, pulling over a chair of his own. "Your friends, Geordi and Ihat and…Danny…"

He glanced to where the android stood bent over the sophisticated computer console beneath the slowly spinning holographic representation of Lal's positronic brain, the light from the monitor screen lending his pale face a warm, golden glow.

"They've nearly finished the final check-through, so I thought, maybe, we could take these few minutes to talk. Get to know each other a little."

Data furrowed his brow.

"What do you wish to know?"

Soong snorted a laugh and shook his head.

"Honestly, son, I wouldn't know where to start. You say we've met before, on Terlina III, and I believe you. But that must have been after I programmed this hologram, so..." He pinched his lips together and sighed through his nose. "I suppose I ought to say I'm sorry, Data."
'Sorry?" Data's puzzled frown deepened. "Sorry for what?"

Soong looked down at his folded hands.

"Lore used to scold me, back at the colony… He said I treated you boys like machines. Me! But, seeing you now… the way you are…"

He swallowed.

"He was right. And I… I think I realize, now, that I probably should have left well enough alone."

Data looked rather lost.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," he said.

Soong smiled, just slightly.

"The truth is, Data, all these years I'd been thinking of you as… well… as an unfinished project, as it were," he confessed. "Of course, I knew that you'd joined Starfleet. That you'd earned your commission as an officer. It just… It never occurred to me that you would have developed into such a… a complete person. All on your own. Even without that chip…"

Data blinked and cocked his head, regarding the older man closely.

"Father?"

"Yes, Data?"

"If that had not effected this transformation," he gestured to his human form, "would you still view me as… a project?"

Soong chuckled and patted Data's knee. Data stared, startled to be touched like that and realizing he rather liked the warm familiarity of the gesture.

"I suppose the rearing of any child can be viewed as a sort of 'project,'" the older man said. "Perhaps the greatest, most challenging project a being can take on."

He smiled gently and reached out to touch his son's face.

"All men are machines, Data," he said. "But, to see a machine develop the kindness and compassion of a man… To observe him exercising his ability to learn, to earn the respect of others and to assert his free will…"

He swallowed, and turned toward Lal's still form.

"And now, to find you've undertaken this great project of your own…"

He looked back at Data, his blue-gray eyes sparkling with unshed tears.

"It's a feeling I never could have imagined. Pride just doesn't do it justice. The fact is, I'm in awe of you, Data, and all that you've accomplished. My only regret is that I could never be a proper father to you. Not in the way you're a father to my grandchild. Danny is right. I'm just not built that way."

He chuckled very slightly.

"Must have been Juliana's input..." he mused.
Data lowered his eyes, uncertain how to process his deeply emotional response to his father's words. 

"I…missed you," he said awkwardly. "So often, I would wonder about my origins. About what I was, who had constructed me, the purpose for which I had been created. I had so many questions, questions no one around me could seem to answer. And yet, despite the circumstances under which we first met—despite the seeming impossibility of your claim to be Noonien Soong—I knew that you were telling me the truth. There was a sense of…familiarity…about you and, for whatever reason, I trusted that. I trust it now. Father…"

He sniffed a little and stared down at his twiddling thumbs.

"It is my fault that Lal suffered this terrible malfunction. I was unaware that, when I enacted the neural transfers from my brain to hers, I was passing on a corrupted copy of the dampening shields inhibiting my own positronic brain. When she wakes up, and discovers my oversight… Father, how can I explain—"

"Now, now, my boy, none of that," Soong said, moving to place a supportive hand on Data's shoulder. "Believe me, Data, your girl will understand."

Data's expression remained tight, but he nodded and raised his head.

"Father?" he said. "May I ask…a personal question?"

"My boy, you may ask me anything you like."

Data glanced at Danny, then back to Soong.

"Did you really pattern my synaptic matrix on…on that of your biological child?"

"In part," he said. "I incorporated scans of my own synapses as well, in your brain and Lore's. And why not? My life's aim was always to prove that human-like consciousness could be reproduced in a positronic construct. That the creation a truly self-aware positronic computer was possible. And, here you are! This 'swap' of Ihat's removes all doubt, at least for me. The fact that you can function in this form— that Danny can function… There could be no greater proof or validation. Except, perhaps, for her."

He smiled down at Lal and gave Data's shoulder a squeeze.

"Life from life," he said reverently. "The living offspring of a conscious machine."

"We're ready!" Geordi called, and Data immediately rushed to the console with Soong at his heels.

"The final scans have come out completely clean," Danny informed them, gesturing to the rows and rows of data streaming across the monitor screens. "Not an anomaly to be found."

He took a bracing breath, then pressed a probe-like tool into Data's hand.

"You should do the honors," he said, and Data nodded, the pair of them wearing matching expressions of anxious anticipation.

"Come with me," Data said and he and Danny walked together to Lal's biobed, the others following close behind.

With a tender touch, Data gently opened an access panel at the top of Lal's head and activated the device in his hand, sending a pulse of energy into the circuity of her positronic brain.
Geordi and Soong gasped as little diagnostic lights began to blink green, yellow and red, and Ihat smiled. Data locked nervous eyes with Danny, then pressed her power switch.

For a timeless moment, nothing happened.

Then, the prone android took a breath, her artificial lungs filling with air for the first time in years.

"Lal…!" Data gasped, swiftly closing the access panel and moving to the side of the bed. Leaning over her, he took her cool hand between his warm palms and pressed it to his flushed face. "Lal, can you hear me? Do you know who I am?"

Lal opened her eyes and blinked. Then, she sat straight up.

"Father," she said and turned her gaze to Data, only to frown at the marked change she observed in his appearance. "Father?"

"Yes, Lal," Data said, unable to stop smiling. "Yes, I am your father."

Lal regarded him curiously, then cocked her head to the side.

"I am accessing. How can this be?"

Soong and Geordi grinned and clasped their hands, Ihat smugly fanned his feathered tail, but Data found himself momentarily unable to speak, choked by feelings so overwhelming he feared he might actually faint.

"It was your Uncle Danny," he finally managed, teetering dizzily between tears and laughter. "Danny and Ihat. They found a way to repair the malfunction, Lal. They brought you back to me."

Lal stared at Danny.

"I was not aware my father had a second brother," she said.

"It's a long story, Lal," he told her, nearly as overcome as his human counterpart.

"And you, sir," she said to Soong. "Are you also a relative?"

"You might say that," he said, and smiled.

"This is Dr. Soong, Lal," Geordi said. "He's your grandfather."

Lal furrowed her brow.

"I was given to understand that Dr. Soong had been killed during the Crystalline Entity's attack on the Omicron Theta science colony."

"Not quite," Soong said. "I'm a hologram, Lal."

Lal blinked, looking as if she were about to ask a question, when she felt something warm and wet splash onto her hand.

"Father," Lal said, her dark eyes widening as she turned to face him. "Father, you're crying."

"I'm sorry, Lal," Data said, "but I can't seem to help it. I… I feel…"

"What do you feel, Father?" Lal asked, covering his hand with hers.
Data sniffed, and smiled broadly up at her.

"I love you, daughter," he said, and pulled her into a close embrace.

"I love you too," she said, and returned the hug just as fervently. "Did you miss me very much while I was offline?"

"Very much, Lal," he spoke into her hair, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

"And, I can stay with you now?" she asked, pulling back so she could see his face. "Here, aboard the Enterprise?"

Data blinked, and his expression fell.

"I—"

"You will if I have anything to say about it," Ihat said, and strutted forward on his long legs. "There are big things brewing, young one. Very big things. Life, freedom, and the definitions thereof, may well hang in the balance of what's to come. And you're to be a part of it, now that you are well. You've all been granted a vital role to play."

"And that role is what, exactly?" Danny demanded.

Ihat smiled his broadest, cagiest smile and snapped his fingers, the holographic cybernetics lab wavering alarmingly as the room around them began to change…

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

References Include - Aerosmith's "I Don't Want To Miss A Thing" (partial misquotes intentional); TNG: Brothers; The Offspring; Datalore; Inheritance; Time's Arrow II; Contagion.

Please Review! :D
Chapter 30

Chapter Thirty

Picard was shaken from his sleep by a jolt of fear so visceral that, for a moment, he wasn't sure if he was dreaming or under attack.

He sat up quickly, trying to calm his breathing, slow his racing heart, but the uneasy feeling did not fade. Instead, he grew more certain that something was there, watching him in the dark.

Some presence he couldn't see.

Uncomfortably conscious of his physical transformation, Picard pulled the blanket up under his chin and barked: "Computer, full lights! Now!"

The sudden brightness made him wince and blink, but he was sure he saw a tall, spindly shadow uncurl from his favorite reading chair and rise up like a graceful, long-limbed spider. As his vision cleared, he watched the shadow turn to face him, taking the form of a towering female figure draped in gauze-like golden cloth. Large, regal eyes burned like twin stars in her narrow face and a gleaming tiara, like the rays of the sun, shined against the curtain of her jet-black hair.

Picard let out a slow breath and slid cautiously to his feet, his wary gaze never leaving the shadow-like being.

"Who are you?" he demanded, straightening his pajama top with a quick tug. "What are you doing in my quarters?"

"Belligerence, Captain?" The woman's voice sliced the air, as sharp and cold as a knife. "This is the attitude you would show me? After the unprecedented largess I have so generously consented to bestow upon you, and your people?"

"Largess?" Picard repeated, his brow wrinkling over his nose. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

The woman's eyes narrowed and she leaned forward, rather threateningly.

"I can see you don't. Even now. I should consider your continued ignorance a willful insult, Captain…were it not so clearly and pathetically genuine."

She straightened and glided slowly toward Picard's desk, her disgust and exasperation palpable.

"I, and my cohort, have been observing your people, Captain," she said. "Gathering research, as you might say. The result: I find you biological creatures to be just as constrained and inflexible as the Constructor Ihat indicated. Perhaps it is down to your frame of reference, curtailed as it is by your animal senses. But unlike that fool Constructor, I have no interest in, or tolerance for, the excuses of lesser beings."

She turned sharply and fixed Picard with her searing gaze.

"You will appear before us when called," she decreed. "That is all."

The woman started to fade, her shadowy form growing more and more insubstantial…
"Masaka – wait!" Picard called, only to be pierced by her incredulous, burning glare as she swiftly rematerialized.

"How dare you address me by name!" she roared.

"Apologies if I breached any protocol," Picard said, putting on his most conciliatory expression. "How would you wish me to address you?"

"I am not addressed by inferiors," the woman declared. "You will keep your eyes down and listen. Matters are coming to a head, now, and our patience with your advocate is growing thin. I appeared here only because Protocol demands your summons be served by a ranking member of the cohort. It has been served."

"But, surely I am entitled to some explanation—"

Masaka's narrow shoulders heaved as she fought to contain her outrage.

"Entitled?" she snapped. "After we have spent these past days reviewing and debating your appeal! It is a rare thing to be granted a hearing, Captain, let alone the chance to speak before we reach our final judgment."

"A hearing?" Picard squinted, a very suspicious glimmer beginning to dawn. "But, if there is to be a hearing, should my people and I not be allowed some time to prepare, or at least the chance to meet with this advocate you mentioned—?"

"The court will convene today, aboard this ship," Masaka said. "Your advocate will join you then."

"But, surely—" Picard started, then sighed and sank back onto the bed.
Masaka had gone, her form melting into the light like a shadow cast against the sun.

The captain scowled and raked his fingers through his long, unbraided hair.

"Courts…appeals…'final judgment'…! Sounds like the Q all over again…" he muttered. "In fact, I think might prefer Q. Irritating as he may be, at least he's always displayed something of a fascination for humanity. This woman…"

He slapped the comm. unit on his bedside table…then thought again…

******

Riker was startled from his dreams by a rather unusual sound.

Someone was knocking on the door to his quarters.

Curious, and a little concerned, he got up, ran a brush through his long, sleep-tangled hair, and pulled a bathrobe over his pajamas, tightening the tie as he called: "Enter!"

The doors slid open to reveal Captain Picard, his expression as tense as his posture.

"Captain! Is something wrong?"

"Apologies for disturbing you at this early hour, Commander," Picard said stiffly. "But we have a situation and, at this point, I don't entirely trust the comm. system."

"I understand, sir," Riker said, and gestured to his coffee table. "Would you care to sit down?"
"No, no, this won't take long," Picard said. "I want you to call a senior staff meeting, to be held in my quarters. It seems we must prepare for a hearing."

"A hearing, Captain?"

"Yes, Number One," Picard said grimly. "Masaka just paid me a visit."

"Masaka?" Riker repeated. "You mean, that sun queen character from the D'Arsay archive?" He frowned. "Then, it's not just Ihat infiltrating our systems after all..."

"It would appear not," Picard said. "Now, it's very probable that these beings, whatever they are, are using our ship's systems to watch us and follow our movements. I'm hoping it might make it a bit more difficult for them if, for the time being, we avoid using the comm. system; at least until we have a clearer understanding of exactly what we're dealing with."

"Then, you want me to contact everyone in person," Riker said.

"I would appreciate it, Number One," Picard told him. "In particular, I want you to track down Mr. Data, Mr. La Forge, and that Danny Soong. I'm done placating Ihat and his ilk. To my mind, Masaka's appearance this morning was nothing short of a threat. We need to know what we're up against, now, and I want those three men up here, ready to report, in twenty minutes. No more excuses."

"Yes, Captain. I'll see to it," Riker said.

Picard nodded his approval, and headed back out the door.

*******

Nora Maskelyne snuggled close to the big, yellow lab and gave his floppy ears a good scratch. The elderly dog closed his eyes and flopped his tail against the sofa cushions.

"What a happy doggie," Nora cooed. "My good, happy doggie. You want your breakfast kibbles, happy doggie?"

Barclay's tail wagged faster.

"You want your kibbles, you have to say 'woof'!"

"Woof!" the dog barked enthusiastically, and Nora wrapped her arms around his neck.

"That's my good boy," she said. "I'll get you your breakfast right away."

"Woof!"

Nora laughed, and headed for the replicator. But, as she placed the order, her expression slowly fell.

It was a lovely pretense they'd built up. A woman and her loyal dog. But, the façade was thin, and growing more fragile by the hour. The little yellow puppy she and Data had grown up with in that strange, holodeck bubble-verse was no more a dog than she was a human being. And soon...too soon...that truth would come out. Their respective crimes would be revealed in a public forum and, after that...

The bowl of kibble materialized and Nora placed it gently on the carpet. Then, on impulse, she said, "Freeze-dried cow's liver, half an ounce."
Once the little grayish cube appeared, she crumbled the treat over the kibble, then called to Barclay.

"Here you are, boy! Breakfast!"

The big, yellow dog eased his aging joints off the sofa and padded slowly across the carpet to investigate the bowl. One whiff of the liver crumbles and he dug right in, lapping at the bowl with enthusiastic crunches and munches.

Inspired by the happy munching, Nora ordered a bowl of cereal and milk for herself then leaned against the wall, deciding she'd rather enjoy this moment than admit to herself just how soon it would all be over.

A curious reaction...this impulse to deny an unpleasant reality in favor of a rather more pleasant fiction.

Even if that fiction was more harmful in the long run.

She wondered if such thoughts were common to humans, and resolved to ask Data...when she saw him...

In the meantime, there was no point in letting her cereal get soggy – or letting Barclay beat her to an empty bowl, despite the dog's head start.

...crunch...crunch...crunch...

******

"Admiral on the bridge!" the ensign at navigation dutifully announced.

Admiral Haftel strode past his bridge crew and into his briefing room, only looking up from the padd in his hands when he reached the corner replicator.

"Give me a toasted spinach bagel with cream cheese and black coffee," he ordered.

"Right away, Admiral," the computer voice acknowledged. "You order is ready, Admiral."

Haftel grabbed the tray and settled in to eat his breakfast at his desk. He was just reaching for his coffee cup, when his bagel stood up and faced him. It reached out two arms, blinked two eyes, opened its mouth and let loose with a surprisingly loud, stereophonic fanfare.

"What the devil—!" Haftel sputtered, rolling his chair back against the bulkhead.

"No, it's only me," a man's voice said, and Haftel looked up to see a silvery figure sitting in the chair across from him – a chair he knew had been as unoccupied as his office just moments before.

The admiral growled.

"Ihat, if you think you can rattle me with a cheap prank like this—"

"Tut tut, Admiral," the intruder scolded. "There you go again, jumping to conclusions. It's a wonder your legs don't get tired."

He smiled.

"I've had enough of this nonsense," the admiral snarled angrily, pushing his once again inanimate breakfast far across the desk. "If you're not Ihat, then who the hell are you?"
The tall man stood, revealing himself to be a powerful, towering figure. His skin was smooth and grayish-pale, his blue eyes deeply inset, like the craters of a moon, and he wore a shimmering silver tunic delicately and elaborately embroidered with threads of white gold. He had a large skull and a thin neck, and he was entirely bald, with no trace of beard or even eyebrows.

"I don't expect your infant race to remember my people," the man said grimly. "We explored this galaxy so very, very long ago… But, I am called Korgano. I've come as a courtesy to deliver a message – one I hope you will receive in the same spirit of good faith with which it was made."

"Tell me your message," the admiral demanded. "Then, I'll decide how to take it."

"I see now why Ihat rigged the draw…" Korgano muttered, and smirked coldly at the admiral. "Masaka would not react well to your attitude."

Haftel started to rise, but Korgano gestured for him to stay in his chair.

"I am here to relay the message that Captain Picard's requested appeal has been deemed worthy of a hearing by our cohort," he said. "Court proceedings will commence today, aboard the Enterprise starship."

"What is this?" Haftel demanded. "What hearing? I demand you—"

"Demands are not advisable, Admiral," Korgano warned. "This is a very rare, very precious opportunity we are affording your people. Do not give us cause to regret our magnanimity."

"Fine," Haftel grunted. "You've delivered your message, and I've received it. Now, you are going to answer some of my questions."

"Questions?" Korgano repeated, his thin lips drawn with wry amusement. "Yes, of course – do keep questioning, Admiral. Questions keep the mind limber, and open to new ideas. In the meantime, you will be summoned once the hearing begins. This is your only notification."

"Now, hold it right there—" Haftel began, only to realize he was talking to himself.

The room was, again, empty.

Haftel grit his teeth and slammed his tray back onto the replicator's shelf for dematerialization. Grabbing his padd, he stalked out onto his bridge and barked, "I'm heading back to the Enterprise. Get my shuttle ready."

"Aye sir," came the first officer's prompt reply.

But, the admiral had already stormed into the turbolift, on his way to the shuttlebay.

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

References include - TNG: Masks; The Offspring; The Measure of a Man; Chain of Command I/II.

So, after months of sticky blocks, I moved this chapter from 29 to 30, trimmed it, revised
it, and here it is. Is it worse? Better? Your opinions are always welcome! Please Review! :D
Chapter Thirty-One

A sharp knock came at the doors to Picard's cabin, followed by four more in rhythmic succession.

Shave-and-a-hair-cut, it rapped out once, and then again.

Shave-and-a-hair-cut.

The captain smiled in mild amusement, figuring it had to be Riker. He stood and straightened the top part of his uniform, shooting a quick glance at his tank of colorful fish as he headed across the room to usher his senior staff in for the meeting.

A tap at the wall controls released the privacy lock, and the double doors opened—

On pitch darkness.

Picard blinked and turned quickly, his eyes darting all around, but the darkness surrounded him completely. A slight wind whistled in the blackness, bringing with it a chill that cut right through his thin, one-piece uniform. He shivered and rubbed his arms, straining his senses for any clue that might reveal where he was, or who had brought him there.

"Hello!" he called out, his high, feminine voice sounding thin and flat, as though he were locked in a soundproofed room rather than standing out in the open. "Is anyone there?"

"Captain?"

He heard a scuffle of movement, whispers in the dark…

"It is him, Will, I can sense it!"

Picard recognized Deanna's deep voice, and shuffled warily toward the sound.

"Counselor," he called, holding his hands out before him. "Where are you? Who else is here?"

"I'm right here, Captain," the counselor called back. "And so are Will and Worf and Beverly."

Worf's grunt was unmistakable.

Riker reported, "We were on our way to your cabin, Captain, when we found ourselves trapped in the dark. I was unable to locate Data, Geordi, and Danny Soong in their quarters, the cybernetics lab, or the holodecks and there's been no sign of them here...wherever 'here' is. Not that we can see much of anything in this damn darkness…"

"Jean-Luc," came Dr. Crusher's voice. "Do you know what's going on? Where exactly is this
Picard sighed in frustration.

"I'm afraid I'm as much in the dark as you are, Doctor," he said, then grimaced, realizing how that might sound given their circumstances. "I can only presume that Ihat and his ilk found out we were intending to meet and are aiming to disconcert us. I suggest we—"

A lonely fanfare, pale and thin, cut through the darkness, followed by the steady, ominous beat of drums. A glimmer of light appeared in the distance and began to grow, accompanied by the eerie sound of low voices intoning a slow, solemn round:

Ora e sempre

Today and Forever

For ages and ages to come

'Till the last trumpet sounds

Immortality...

Born in our present state

Never were babies we

Live where no mortal has lived

With a nobility

Yet none humanity

We have no children or kin

Ora e sempre

Today and Forever

For ages and ages to come

To the first cracking of Doom!

Immortality...

Immortality...

A shadowy procession took shape in the dimness, approaching in a steady march past what looked like a line of pillars, or trees. The procession turned a curve, and Worf took up a defensive stance in front of the others, his sharp teeth bared.

But, the chanting procession passed without pause, the light fading into the distance along with the beating drums and the thin trumpet call.

"What the hell was that?" Riker demanded, trying hard not to sound as unnerved as he felt.

"Maybe we're meant to follow—" Troi started, but Crusher firmly cut her off.
"No."

"Doctor?" Picard inquired, concerned by her forceful reaction.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I know how this sounds. But those lights…that singing… It reminded me of stories my grandmother used to tell. Tales of the will-o'-the-wisp; fairy fires, carried by ghouls or cursed spirits meaning to lure travelers to dark and dangerous places."

"There are similar tales in Klingon legend," Worf growled. "Wraiths of the dishonored dead sent to draw the hunter from his path…"

A chilly gust blew over them, and Picard straightened, turning a defiant glare toward the wind.

"I hardly think—"

A flood of white light made the gathered officers duck and gasp, shielding their eyes as a large room slowly came into focus around them. The room was whitewashed and airy. The high, pointed ceiling had exposed rafters that reminded Picard of an ancient, wooden chapel/local history museum he'd often visited as a child in France, eager to view its display cases of archaeological treasures. Carvings in stone and metal coins left by the Celts and the Romans; medieval relics and illuminated texts; cellular phones and tablets from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries…

There was none of that there, just rows upon rows of pew-like benches set up in two columns. A wide central aisle led up to a waist-high wooden gate of sorts, separating the benches from what looked like the layout of a courtroom, complete with jury box, long tables for the defense, the prosecution, and the court clerk, and a very tall, very imposing judge's bench with a witness stand to the judge's left.

For the first few disoriented moments the officers seemed to be alone in the cavernous space. Then, a wide, heavy door swung open behind them.

Geordi, Data and Danny walked uncertainly into the room, closely flanked by two others: an older man with wild hair and a young woman Picard recognized at once.

"Oh, my God…" Troi brought a hand to her mouth, her empathic senses confirming what her eyes refused to believe. "But it can't be… Lal?"

"Hello, Counselor Troi," Lal said and approached her, smiling rather shyly. "My father has told me of the physical alterations that inflicted on the bridge crew. I wish to offer my sincere—"

"Stop! Come no closer," Worf growled, fixing a terrible glare on the girl and the man who looked uncannily like a sixty-year-old version of Data. "It is a trick, Captain. Lal and Dr. Soong are dead."

Lal froze in place, her eyes wide, but Data placed a calming hand on her arm, his pale, human face glowing with a deep happiness the Klingon's fiercest snarls couldn't dim.

"No, Worf," Data said, "I assure you, it is no trick. This is my father, Dr. Noonien Soong."

"Well… At the very least, a rather sophisticated holographic representation," Soong qualified.

"And, this is indeed my daughter, Lal," Data introduced proudly.

"But…how…?" Dr. Crusher started.

"It was my counterpart Danny who managed to identify and address the underlying problem that led
to her catastrophic malfunction," Data said, beaming at his android double. "He, Ihat, Geordi and I have been working all night to repair and upgrade my daughter's positronic brain. Isn't it wonderful, Captain?" he asked, his blue eyes shining. "My daughter is alive!"

"That is indeed wonderful, Data," Picard said, eyeing the young android rather warily before turning his gaze to Dr. Soong. "But, I would like to know more about—"

"What the devil is going on here! Where the hell am I!"

The group turned to see Admiral Haftel, quite red in the face, standing beside them in the aisle. Spotting the captain, he advanced in a rage that was quickly derailed when he caught sight of Lal clutching her father's hand in fear.

"Picard!" he roared. "I demand to know what… No," he gasped, staggering away from the frightened girl. "No, it's impossible… Cascade failure cannot be reversed!"

"Father…" Lal said, moving even closer to Data. "Father, I am scared."

"There is no reason to fear, Lal," Data said soothingly. "I am human now. As such, my rights to life, natural guardianship, and intellectual property are much more clearly defined than they were when I was an android. I am not Starfleet's property, and neither are you. Besides, trickster though he may be, I cannot believe Ihat would have brought your Uncle Danny here to revive us only to see our family torn apart once again. Not after we have all worked so hard to bring you back."

Lal hugged her father, burying her face in his shoulder. Data held her close, smoothing back her short, dark hair before placing a warm, protective kiss at the top of her head.

The admiral stared, flabbergasted, and started to sink down onto one of the benches—

Only to jump up with a yell when he landed in Ihat's lap.

"Good morning!" The feathered being greeted the group with a broad, saurian grin. Rising to his full, imposing height, he approached Picard and offered a polite bow, his red tail fanning impressively behind him.

"Hello again, Captain!" he said. "Your appeal to our cohort is set to be heard in just a few minutes. I hope you have your arguments all prepared."

Picard frowned.

"I was not informed that—"

"No matter, no matter, I'm sure you'll all be ready when the time comes," Ihat said, turning his sharp green eyes toward the open door.

"Ah! And here they are!" he crowed, striding up to what looked like a ring of roughly carved standing stones.

Picard estimated there were about twelve arranged just inside the door, with more standing in even lines outside. An aged yellow Labrador stood stiffly in the center of the ring, wagging his tail.

"Barclay!" Data exclaimed, and the dog trotted happily up to him, his tail wagging even faster as Data crouched down to scratch his floppy ears. "How have you been, old friend? Where is Nora?"

One of the standing stones wobbled, then began to jiggle like very firmly set gelatin. The vibrations
this caused made a series of grinding rumblings that sounded uncannily like, "Nora. I am Nora. I am here."

Data blinked and stared, his hand stilling on Barclay's back.

"I do not understand," he said, slowly straightening back up. "Ihat…are you responsible for…?"

"This is who we are," a larger stone vibrated. "This is our true form. I am Dumont. Dr. Dumont."

Picard frowned, just as lost and confused as his second officer.

"Dr. Dumont? I'm afraid I don't quite follow. Perhaps, if you could explain—"

"Stop. Just stop! This is all too much for me," Haftel said, running a hand over his hair. "First, I get a visit from a shadow who animates my breakfast and calls himself a Preserver. Then, I'm plucked right out of my shuttlecraft only to find myself in this ridiculous courtroom facing an impossibly reanimated android and listening to a group of talking rocks! And, that's not even touching on the rest of you!"

He glared around at the Enterprise officers, his stare falling hardest on Picard, Data, Danny, and Dr. Soong.

"I tell you, I've had it," he snapped, advancing on Ihat. "Send me back to my ship, immediately, or I will—"

"You will do as you are told, or this appeal will end before it's begun," Ihat said coldly, looming over the flushed admiral like a predatory bird.

Haftel scowled darkly, but his rising anger seemed to sink back down below the surface.

Ihat stepped back with a smug little smile, then turned and opened his arms as if to embrace the entire group.

"I want to thank you all for being here," he announced grandly. "I know it's been a long road, and the trials for some have been more trying than others. But, I assure you, everything I and my cohort have done up to now, no matter how strange or discomfiting it may have seemed, has been to prepare each of you for this moment. You only get one chance at this. Once chance to make your case. If you fail, your appeal will be denied and you and your people will all know the honor of becoming templates for the long-awaited rebirth of our ancient civilization. But if you succeed…"

He took a long breath, looking to each member of his audience in turn.

"If you succeed, the future of my people will be in your hands…and entirely at your mercy."

"We have a chance, then?" Riker asked dryly.

"Oh, most certainly you do," Ihat told him. "For you see, in our justice system, it is customary that each individual is judged by their own standards. That means your case is to be argued, weighed, and judged – not by us. But, by yourselves."

"And you, Ihat?" Picard asked. "You and Masaka and Korgano? What is to be your role in all this?"

A shimmer glistened on the bench beside him, and three objects appeared. A clay mask emblazoned with a sun, a mask of metal as silvery as a moon, and a tablet bearing the mark of a stylized feather.
The admiral looked angrily blank, but Picard and his officers shared a wary glance. They knew those objects, and what - or, rather, who - they represented.

"Our audience stands ready; our witnesses are in line. There are but three roles left to fill," Ihat said, gesturing to the objects. "An advocate for the defense. An advocate for the prosecution. And a judge to cast the final ruling."

He smiled darkly, his raptor-like eyes unnervingly direct.

"Any volunteers?"

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

References Include: TNG: The Chase; Rascals; The Offspring; Masks; Doctor Who: The Stones of Blood; Red Dwarf: The Inquisitor; "Ora e Sempre" by Bernard Hoffer featured in the 1985 Rankin/Bass Christmas Special "The Life and Adventures of Santa Claus."

Please Review! :D
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

But wait, there's more! Just who are Ihat, Masaka and Korgano and where did they come from? What is the purpose of the D'Arsay archive? And, just what is this appeal business all about? The answers to all this and more can start to be found right here. I hope you enjoy this chapter! Please let me know what you think! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty-Two

Long, long ago in faraway star system, a civilization thrived on a lush and living planet. It was a culture steeped in ritual, in which all aspects of life, from birth to death, from egg to meat, from seed to fruit, from grain to bread, were interpreted through the lens of a rich mythological tradition.

Of the traditional ceremonies that punctuated each year and chronicled the peoples' lives, the Hunt was the greatest celebration. It was not a regular event like so many annual festivals. It occurred in its own time and, in some years, not at all.

This was the day of the solar eclipse, when the two Great Hunters, the sun Masaka and the moon Korgano, briefly shifted their roles in the sky. The lunar eclipse was more common, as Masaka was known to be an ambitious queen, determined to keep her place in ascendance. But while the solar eclipse was rarer, it was far more spectacular a show.

Only Korgano could coax the vigilant sun queen to sleep during the day, and only when he was quick enough to catch her already nodding. On his orders, her attendants would carry the sun queen to her bed while his moon took over the throne. Day turned to night, the tides swelled, and the silvery moon fish became more plentiful until Korgano tired and Masaka woke to take the throne once more.

This civilization thrived for millennia untouched and unaware of the greater galaxy beyond their own, isolated system. As natural resources were abundant and the population small, competition between groups very rarely came to blows. Balance was their guiding philosophy, peaceful transitions of power the example set by the sky itself, and the observer found this fascinating.

At that time, a war was raging in the observer's own culture. A war of opposing philosophies. Advances in block transfer technology had allowed his people a choice: to shed their frail, organic forms and begin a new life as beings of pure energy, observing the universe from a continuum built and maintained by their combined powers of thought. Or, to remain as they were; brilliant minds enclosed in fragile shells of meat and bone, destined to die and be remembered only by the traces they had left behind.

The observer had chosen to live, age, and die in his own form; to remain a part of the spatiotemporal continuum of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching sensation to which he had been born. He and those who shared his views had long perceived themselves as the 'gardeners' of their galaxy, seeding life on lifeless planets where chemical conditions were right. These self-replicating molecules, these protein strands, these thinking, evolving beings were to be their children, their immortality, passing along selected aspects of their genetic heritage long after the gardeners' own
fading civilization had crumbled to dust.

The observer’s wife had joined the opposing side, eager to abandon her mortality for life eternal. Passing along a genetic heritage by seeding world after world seemed to her an uncertain and ungratifying chore, since there was no guarantee the planted strands would take, or that intelligent life would evolve. Even if they did, if dozens of new cultures arose to explore each other’s worlds, which of them would know whom to thank for the endless forms, philosophies, and variations they enjoyed and shared together? Which of them would remember the Preserver race that spawned them?

No, she and her like-minded fellows argued, their stance growing firmer and fiercer as the philosophical divide between Preserver and Eternal factions began to ossify. No, better to keep our identities, maintain our conscious awareness, and observe any space-time developments from afar, freed from the fears, pressures, and limitations of linear time. It is our own individuality, our accumulation of knowledge and experience, that must be preserved. To seek immortality among the mortal races is a delusive folly. The physical will always decay and be forgotten. Only thought, our conscious self-awareness, can be truly eternal.

By the time the observer discovered this faraway planet of cyclical myth and ritualized balance, the battle between the factions among his own people had reached the point where any compromise between the opposing philosophies appeared impossible. The Eternals prioritized the mind, becoming increasingly dismissive, and even hostile, to physical, biological forms and the changing life cycles they represented. The Preservers valued that change, valued evolution and mortal impermanence; the turn of the wheel from one generation to the next.

On this lush and verdant planet it seemed to the exhausted observer that both views had found a place. And, the longer he stayed, the more he learned, the more hopeful he became that if he could convince his wife to join him, to see all he had seen, she might agree to postpone her metamorphosis and retain her physical form with him, in this place…at least, until his own end had come.

He'd intended to leave, to discuss his plans with her in person, before the Eternals left their parent universe for a new continuum, where energy and matter were as fluid as thought and the entirety of linear time could be viewed as a whole, at a glance, or dissected into static slices for closer study. But, as he was making return preparations, word came that he was already too late. The Eternals had gone, all together and all at once, leaving the Preservers to mind their ‘gardens’ and face their inevitable end…alone…

The observer's wife reveled in her new being, and yet, somehow, she remained irritable, angry, and discontented. For, the truth was, despite their opposing beliefs, the love between the observer and his wife remained a true and solid bond, and much of her rage and fury stemmed from what she viewed as his selfish choice to die a mortal, forever depriving her of his valued debate and companionship.

The observer, by contrast, viewed her decision to eschew mortality as the selfish choice. In his mind and in his heart immortality equated to stagnation. He believed eternity to be an illusion, a trap in itself. For, without the experience of linear duration, without the observation of change over time, there could be no growth, no learning, no wonder…

From her outside perspective in the continuum of the Eternals, the observer's wife began to check in on her husband, identifying and tracing his unique lifeline to its inevitable conclusion.

Her hope had been that prolonged loneliness without her would soften his resolve to die a mortal – perhaps even convince him to accept metamorphosis and join her in the Eternals' continuum.

What she saw threatened to extinguish that hope.
An asteroid collision in a far-off field had sent a number of fragments hurling through space, on a direct course toward her husband's favored planet. Most burned up in the atmosphere: a stunning shower of shooting stars that left the inhabitants in awe. But two of the largest rocks made direct impact. One hit the ocean floor, devastating the shorelands of three continents. The other fell on land, piercing through a volcanic caldera, or sinkhole, as delicate and volatile as the Yellowstone Supervolcano on Earth.

The volcanic hotspot exploded with enough force to shake the planet, affecting its balanced relationship with its moon and minutely shifting its orbit around its sun. Lava flows swallowed entire forests, thick layers of molten ash covered the ground for thousands of miles in every direction. Heavy dust clouds dropped the temperature, decimating crops and livestock.

Survivors of the disaster soon realized that, despite the ever-present haze, the days were growing longer, the sun was growing stronger. Before long, there was no real night at all. The sun's light was strong enough to blot out the stars in all directions.

The peaceful transitions between the two Great Hunters had come to a violent and terrible end. It seemed that without her counterpart to pursue her and force her to sleep, Masaka, the sun goddess, had grown quite mad, refusing to close her burning eye until all of her people had dried to dust.

The planet, once lush and green, became a desert of scorching heat and endless sun. Surface water evaporated into the atmosphere and never fell as rain, drying out ponds and streams, lakes and rivers, even the oceans between the continents. Desperate communities huddled around aquifers and underground wells. For the first time in their history, groups began to kill each other in the fight over water and other dwindling resources. Tortures ranged from ritual suicide to sacrificial murder, eventually escalating to all-out war. As the climate worsened, the battles grew more violent, more bloody, their deeply spiritual yearning to restore the natural balance they had lost threatening to tear their minds apart.

The observer's wife saw all this. She saw her husband's ending, a wandering death of exposure and thirst, and she found it unacceptable.

Leaving her faction, she returned to her husband's universe, manifesting there in her own physical form in a diamond-shaped flash of light. Their reunion was brief but powerful, each at last acknowledging they could never be truly happy without the company of the other.

The Eternal entreated her husband to join her, but the Preserver refused to leave without saving something of the civilization he had grown to cherish.

Infuriated by her husband's stubbornness, but unwilling to return to her continuum without him, the Eternal engaged the services of a traveling Constructor; a third branch of her ancient race that had gone their own way long before the split that divided the Preservers and the Eternals.

Intrigued by the Eternal's mental manipulation of energy and matter, the Constructor devised a means of translating the conscious awareness of each survivor into electronic data he could then store in a sophisticated computerized archive. Long after the planet the Preserver had loved had been swallowed up by its sun, long after that same yellow star had expanded and died, the Constructor's archive would travel on, gliding through space until it met with a computer system capable of accessing and restoring the archive's data files.

"We are all of us machines after all, operating on genetic programs that define our shape, our species, our lifespan," the Constructor said with a laugh. "Whether we be carbon or silicon-based, or formed of the energy of pure thought, we all require that same electric spark to live, to think, to dream. Here in this archive, you will find all of that information and energy encapsulated and stored for later use,
In order to affect his transformation of the planet's people from organic matter to digital information, the Constructor was required to move among them, scanning and storing each individual by hand. After some instruction, the Preserver and his wife began to assist his work.

The three of them together, the Constructor, the Preserver, and the Eternal, were interpreted by the desperate people as manifestations of their ancient gods. The Eternal with her fiery temper became Masaka in their eyes, while her cool, pale counterpart became Korgano. The Constructor, with his quirky attitude and talent for shifting forms, was equated with the trickster Ihat, a harbinger of the Last Days who, according to legend, was destined to be the first to cross the boundary between Death and Life to start a new age of Rebirth.

News of their mission spread quickly and survivors flocked to them in droves, bringing with them all their remaining possessions and sacred objects to be stored with them in archive form until the time of Rebirth. Not one of them understood the digital transfer, or the true nature of their alien saviors. But in their presence, their faith in life’s balance was restored until, finally, all but a handful of frightened holdouts had been transferred and stored in the Constructor's archive.

The Preserver's mission complete, the husband and wife thanked the Constructor for his work, launched the archive into space, and prepared themselves to manifest in the continuum of the Eternals.

But, the Eternals did not take kindly to the wife's actions. Nor could they comprehend her continued attachment to a Preserver traitor who valued mortality and decay over eternal consciousness. In retaliation for her abandonment, and as an example to any others who might waver in their resolve and, thereby, weaken their continuum, the Eternals blocked their entry, forcing them to manifest right back on the doomed planet, along with the archive they had sacrificed so much to save. The Eternals, to ensure their message got through, then erected an energy field designed to prevent any hope of relaunch, or escape.

Calling to the Constructor for help, the stranded Eternal and her Preserver husband explained what had happened, how the Eternals had trapped them and the archive, and how all their hard work would be destroyed if he couldn't think of some way around the energy field.

Never one to resist a challenge, the Constructor gave the puzzle a great deal of thought and, before long, announced his solution. He could draw on the energy field itself to enact a final transformation. The Eternal, the Preserver, and the Constructor himself would all be converted into digital information stored within the archive they had created. The resulting drain would weaken the field enough to allow for an automatic launch even the Eternals could not prevent.

The benefit would be their escape and, ultimately, their survival. The drawback would be their data would be stored within the context of the archive's operating system, making the three powerful beings - quite literally - the stuff of myth and legend, as the people stored within had so fervently believed them to be.

The desperate couple agreed. The conversion was enacted and the archive launched, breaking through the weakened energy barrier to begin its trek through the freezing depths of space.

It picked up particles along the way – pieces of floating ice and dust that clung to its exterior and formed a frozen shell. As the millennia passed, the shell grew thicker, denser. The archive took on the aspect of a rogue comet, exciting little comment or curiosity…

Until one day, some eighty-seven million years after its initial launch, the ice-encrusted archive...
crossed paths with the flagship of the Federation's Starfleet, and the captain ordered a scan…

*******

Picard removed Korgano's mask, placed it back on the courtroom bench, and looked to Data and Riker, who had already removed Ihat's marker and Masaka's clay mask, respectively.

"Did you see—" he started, and the other two men nodded, knowing without words that they had all just shared the same experience.

"Theirs is an intriguing history, Captain," Data said. "I would welcome the opportunity to study their records in more detail."

"As would I, Mr. Data," Picard said. "But, we face a different issue here. This archive is filled with the digital blueprints for what is, essentially, an entire civilization of conscious, electronic beings. Whether we win or lose this appeal…can we allow them to be released – to have free reign over a planet or planets of their choosing?"

"It's a pretty big risk, Captain," Riker said grimly. "We've already gotten a pretty good glimpse of what Ihat, Korgano and Masaka are capable of. What do we know about the capabilities of the rest of their 'people'? If we lose this appeal and these electronic…beings…maintain control over our computers, it could mean the end of civilization as we know it."

"Not necessarily," Data interjected, his forehead creased in a frown. "I may no longer have a positronic brain, but from what I've been able to gather, Ihat and his people have asked only to be allowed the chance to live and grow and put down roots, as any refugees might. Why should their electronic status matter?"

"Don't play ignorant, Data," Danny said, coming up beside his human counterpart with his arms folded over his chest. "You know very well why."

"Knowing and understanding are two different things," Data retorted. "As long as these beings are treated with respect—"

"Respect!" Danny scoffed. "Come on, Data. The Federation still struggles with the concept of defining you and your daughter as life forms, let alone a family unit. And, it's not just electronic beings they have trouble with. Human tolerance can only be expected to stretch so far before it snaps against a wave of fear and conservative push-back. No matter how the pendulum swings, you can always count on humans to carry their special prejudices along. Anyone considered 'different' enough to make others uncomfortable becomes a scapegoat – or, worse yet – a target. Anyone they dislike, or think they can use, or possesses traits that they covet or fear. Believe me, brother. I've been there. And, so have you."

Data pursed his lips, his blue gaze moving protectively toward his daughter.

Picard's jaw also tightened, and he shook his head with a sigh.

"We're losing sight of the issue at hand," he said. "Losing this appeal could literally mean handing over control of the Federation, if not the galaxy, to these D'Arsay beings – whatever they are."

"Ihat left it to us to choose advocates for the defense and for the prosecution, as well as the judge," Riker said. "Their way of judging us on our own terms, as it were."

He sighed deeply and pushed his long hair back from his face.
"Maybe it's our experience with Q, but I can't help thinking this is a trap of some sort."

"You may be right, Number One," Picard said. "The fact that Ihat and his ilk will be judging us on our own terms only makes it that much more vital that we fill these roles wisely. Our position for both the prosecution and defense must be clear and unmuddied, and our witness testimony directly on point."

"But, who should we choose?" Dr. Crusher asked, joining their little circle along with Troi and Worf. "If you ask me, appealing against their desire to use us as 'templates' to restore their race is less a matter of intellectual debate, and more a matter of finding an emotional connection. We already know they're curious about us and our culture – Ihat in particular. If we can prove to them it's worth their while to preserve us, perhaps it would be easier for us to reach them…to convince them to return to their archive, or at least find a compromise we all can live with."

Worf grunted grimly.

"This 'appeal' is a mere distraction. A farce," he said. "Their innate ability to infiltrate and control our computers has already given these…energy beings…the upper hand. Not to mention the powers they have demonstrated by their assault on our physical forms! Why should they abide by anything we might decide?"

"She makes a good point," Dr. Soong spoke up, poking curiously at the masks Ihat had left them.

Worf growled low in his throat and readjusted his silvery baldric in an attempt to make his slender shoulders and torso appear broader.

"Perhaps so," Data said, thoughtfully rubbing his rough chin. "But, I believe Dr. Crusher may be on to something…"

He smiled and snapped his fingers.

"Yes…yes!" he said excitedly. "Don't you see? From the very beginning, Ihat has been acting as a messenger – a translator – not solely from his people to us, but from us back to his people."

Geordi leaned forward on the bench where he'd been listening, his forehead furrowed over his VISOR.

"What are you talking about, Data?" he asked.

"Consider the clues he has offered us," Data said. "Consider his behavior. I believe that Ihat has already been working to make our case. Now, it is up to us to finish what he started, and prove his trust in us is not misplaced."

Striding to the front bench, Data picked up the three masks, then turned his bright gaze to the captain.

"With your permission, sir, I would like to hand these out."

"To whom?" Crusher asked.

"Dr. Dumont!"

"Yes, Data?" the large woman asked, and got to her feet. She had resumed her human shape shortly after Ihat left them, as had the rest of the silicate creatures that had been posing as Federation researchers.
"Dr. Dumont," Data repeated, dashing up the wide aisle to meet her. "You and your people have been intrigued by the Federation and its citizens since you first learned of our existence. Yet, you fear us as well. That is why you embarked on this deception of yours and impersonated the human research team, is it not? You wished to evaluate whether we posed a threat to your way of life?"

"I will admit, that was a large part of it. Yes," she said rather warily.

"Then, Doctor, would you consent to acting as advocate for the prosecution? You will be making the argument and calling witnesses to contest the captain's appeal."

"Just one damn minute here," Admiral Haftel said, shooting up from his angry glower on the opposite bench. "What the hell do you think you're doing! We don't know anything about these silicate, rock-morph…things! Picard, you can't seriously—"

"Admiral," Data interrupted, moving sternly toward the increasingly irate man. "You passionately endorse the Federation's interests – which to you, despite your expertise in cybernetic technologies, has primarily meant the interests of humanity and related biological life forms. You are keenly in tune with Earth's human-centric values, and have vocally argued throughout your career in favor of legislating harsh checks against the development of conscious machines. Machines such as my daughter, my brother Lore, and…formerly…myself. I would, therefore, ask if you would consent to serve as advocate for the defense."

"What?" the admiral sputtered.

"Data, what are you doing?" Geordi asked, walking up the aisle to join him. "Surely the captain would make a better argument, don't you think? And, as for the prosecution's case, I'm sure Commander Riker could—"

"No," Troi said, her dark eyes oddly distant. "No, Geordi, Data's right. Masaka and Korgano did not grant us this appeal because we were all of one mind. They put us here to observe how we handle our own opposing views."

"You're talking about a recipe for disaster," Haftel grunted angrily. "Those mechanical nightmares have already stacked the deck against us! How long do you think humanity will last if those machines really do take over!"

"Admiral," Troi countered calmly. "If we have become so polarized in our minds and in our values that we cannot effectively debate among ourselves, how can we expect these beings to trust us with their future?"

"That is a very good point, Counselor," Picard said, stepping forward. "Admiral, I must also agree with Mr. Data. I've said before that a courtroom is meant to be a crucible. In it we burn away irrelevancies until we are left with a pure product, the truth. For all time."

He glanced at Data, offering him a small smile, which Data returned in kind.

"Admiral…Dr. Dumont…" Picard said, looking to them each in turn. "Will you accept these appointments, and argue your positions to your best ability?"

"I can't speak for the admiral, Captain," Dumont said. "But I can certainly recognize the importance of what you are asking of me. Nevertheless…"

She glanced at her people, her eyes resting for a long moment on Nora Maskelyne, and the yellow dog resting at her feet.
"Yes," she said, returning her gaze to Picard. "I will accept."

"Thank you," Data said sincerely as he pressed Korgano's silver mask into her hands.

"Admiral?" Picard prompted.

The admiral's pouchy face was tight and grim, but the sight of Dumont holding the mask seemed too much for him to take.

"All right, hand it over," he demanded, and Data gave him Ihat's tablet.

The admiral grunted in distaste.

"Don't I get a mask?" he protested.

"This is for the judge," Data told him, turning from the irritable admiral to approach Danny.

"Well, brother?" he asked, holding out Masaka's clay mask. "You are not from this reality. Moreover, you have had the privilege of knowing what it is to be human, and what it is like to think and process information as an android. You adapted what you learned from your father to save my life, then worked closely with Ihat to restore my daughter's. Will you serve as our impartial judge?"

"Good grief," Danny said, and ran a pale hand over his face. "Data...! What was that Ihat was saying about Constructors not sitting in judgement?"

"Did you not tell him you were not a Constructor, but a repairman?" Data retorted, a slight teasing tone in his voice.

"Good grief!" Danny groaned again and looked around the courtroom, his golden eyes resting first on Lal…and then, on the hologram of Dr. Soong.

"...Father..."

His fists clenched tightly and he turned away, throat tight and his chest aching despite its lack of a human heart. His mind was racing, revisiting all those years he had spent running…denying…

So much lost time...

"Damnit, Data, I'll do it," he said, and took the clay mask, turning it gently between his hands. "Is this the same mask you made when the D'Arsay program first attacked your systems?"

"I can't be certain," Data admitted. "But I would not be surprised if it were."

Danny nodded somberly, and headed to the front of the room to take his place behind the judge's bench.

"All right," he called out, gamely banging the wooden gavel he found there against its sound block. "Everyone present is to come to order. I want advocates for the defense and prosecution to outline their arguments and prepare a witness list. We begin in ten minutes."

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes
References Include: TNG: The Chase; The Measure of a Man; Datalore; The Offspring; Encounter at Farpoint; Justice; Masks; Star Trek: The Motion Picture; Doctor Who: Logopolis; Doctor Who: The Stones of Blood; Doctor Who: Enlightenment; Red Dwarf: The Inquisitor.

Please review! :D
Chapter Thirty-Three

The preparations had taken longer than ten minutes. While Picard and the other Enterprise officers seemed relatively familiar with the overall situation and many of the faces in the courtroom, both Dr. Dumont and Admiral Haftel had fervently argued that they needed more time to line up and interview the available witnesses before they could put together a coherent case.

"I find your request quite reasonable," Danny said from the judge's bench. "After all, we've all been shoved into this without much warning, let alone time to prepare. How does two hours sound? Would that be enough time for both sides to get a basic lay of the land, so to speak?"

The courtroom hummed with what sounded like assent. Haftel scowled, as if ready to protest further, but once Dr. Dumont called out her agreement, Haftel was quick to follow.

"Very well. Then, if there are no objections..." Danny paused long enough to scan his gaze across the crowded room before resting his stare on Haftel. The admiral grunted irritably, but crossed his arms without a word. "Right. I declare a two-hour recess. Any available conference rooms are at your disposal. But, after that time, I will hear opening arguments. In accordance with standard Federation courtroom procedure – at least, where I'm from – we will start with Dr. Dumont."

Danny slammed his gavel, and the courtroom burst at once into chattering babble. Leaving Picard, Data, and the other Enterprise officers to corral the crowd into some kind of order, Danny took his ceramic mask and stood, striding to a formidable-looking wooden door marked 'Judge's Chambers' in gold letters. He smirked a little, then walked right in to the spacious room beyond.

Ihat jumped up from the polished wooden desk, his face an angry snarl, his arms raised, and his bright red tail flared wide.

"What do you think you're doing!" the being exclaimed, keeping uncomfortably close as Danny calmly closed the door and headed over to take a seat behind the desk. "A two-hour recess! Korgano, I might be able to talk to. But, just how much patience do you think Masaka has!"

"You shouldn't be in here," Danny said. "A judge is supposed to be impartial, you know. No ex-parte discussions."

"Who's talking ex-parte?" Ihat said. "I'm just warning you that—"

"You're trying to influence how I run my courtroom," Danny countered, pointedly ignoring the taller being's pop-eyed look of outrage. "That's right, Ihat, I said my courtroom. Now, you may have brought me here without my consent. You may have manipulated me and all of us with your shape-shifting, play-acting and unwelcome physical alterations. But you cannot manipulate these proceedings. Not if you were being truthful when you declared this appeal was to be judged by our standards." He leaned forward. "Were you being truthful, Ihat? Or, is this whole scenario just another scheme?"

Ihat's predatory eyes smoldered green.

"Who do you think you're talking to?" he snarled, moving in closer. "A trickster is not a clown,
Danny Soong, and a Constructor does far more than build. I am a designer, an innovator. I can permeate and subvert the atomic structure of every species in your known galaxy, rearrange their molecules, devise entire civilizations to whom the nuclei of the cat Spot's cells would be expanding universes unto themselves. I can breathe life into your computer systems, make all your drinking water self-aware, take—"

"You could," Danny broke in, refusing to cringe back or show any outward sign of intimidation as the angry being spoke. "You certainly could, and the peoples of this galaxy would be hard-pressed to stop you. At least, at first," he said, meeting Ihat's gaze. "But, you haven't. And, you won't."

"Oh, I won't, won't I?" Ihat countered. "And what makes you so sure?"

"Your actions," Danny said. "Your attitude toward me and toward Dr. Soong's hologram, toward Data, and toward Data's child. In your role as Messenger for your people, you've already shown that, deep down, you respect the rule of law. And, more than that…"

"What?" Ihat pressed. "What do you think you know, O Stubborn Repairman?"

Danny regarded him, unable to tell if the powerful being's ire was real or an act, but feeling compelled to speak just the same.

"For all its flaws and bigotries and petty shortsightedness, I think you believe the Federation is worth preserving," he said. "As it is, and in its own right. If you didn't, why would you have gone to such extreme and creative lengths to support Picard's appeal?"

"You think I support this appeal!" Ihat exclaimed.

"I do," Danny said calmly. "I think you've been scheming on our behalf from practically the first moment your virus-like codes infiltrated the starship Enterprise and Commander Data's systems. Everything you've done, every trick you've pulled, has seemed designed to test the extent of our knowledge; our capacity for empathy, humor, and compassion; our willingness to adapt, to open our minds to ways of thinking and being that may be unfamiliar to—"

Ihat's glare darkened and he pushed in closer, invading Danny's personal space until their foreheads practically touched. Danny swallowed despite himself, but he didn't blink or cringe away.

"You chose the Marx Brothers," he said, sitting straighter in his chair. "You could have picked anything, any other means of translation, but you chose to relate to us, and to your cohort, through comedy and music. After all, when are minds more open than when they are laughing together?"

Ihat maintained his glare for another long moment, then broke out with a broad, sharp-toothed grin.

"I knew you understood," he said, sitting back on Danny's desk and swinging his long, thin legs. "The captain, too, has performed wonderfully well on the tests that I have set, as have his senior staff. Such promising responses have me convinced our cultures could coexist and, I must admit, that pleases me. I have no wish to see the varied civilizations of this galaxy swallowed up, transformed and overtaken by our own. But, Masaka and Korgano are far less trusting than I. And you must admit, these Enterprise officers are a bit of an aberration in their openness to non-organic forms of life, not to mention the value they place on reciprocal tolerance and empathy. Based on my research, I would think when it comes to recognizing and respecting the rights of electronic and other non-biological beings, the attitudes embodied by Admiral Haftel and his ilk might be more representative."

Danny pressed his lips together and furrowed his brow.
"The admiral didn't pass, did he," he said somberly.

Ihat slowly shook his head.

"Not the admiral," he said, "and not the so-called 'specialists' aboard his ship. Even after all that has happened, not one of them has openly and unequivocally recognized my codes for what they are."

"A life form," Danny said. "A true electronic consciousness. Ihat..." The android sighed through his nose and turned his golden gaze to the being perched on his desk. "That's what this is really about, isn't it," he said. "This hearing. It's another test. A final test. Not necessarily for us and the Enterprise, but for Admiral Haftel and the Federation at large."

"You explorers...you welcome the unknown," Ihat said. "But, to the admiral, his sense of safety and of power are found in the familiar. In the insularity of time-honored institutions and modes of thought, the foundations of which cannot and must not be shaken. He and Masaka are quite alike in that regard. More's the pity..."

"Ihat," Danny said, "What are you trying to tell me?"

The feathered being averted his eyes and hopped off the desk, his dramatic tail swaying behind him as he paced across the room.

"I wasn't kidding about Masaka's temper. She will not be pleased with this delay of yours."

"What's the rush?" Danny said. "You and your cohort have already shown you can manipulate time. Eighteen years in eighteen minutes, isn't that how long you trapped Data on the holodeck? What's two hours compared to that?"

Ihat smirked, just slightly, and continued pacing.

"Masaka is an Eternal," he said. "At least, she was. Once. And now, she wants to be living. She'll never consent to being locked up in that archive again, dormant, nothing but coded data..."

Danny frowned.

"So, that's the message you were sent to deliver," he said. "Well, you can tell Masaka from me, I will not be pressured, bullied, or threatened. Remember, you set the rules here, not me. And you said our case was to be argued, weighed and judged – not by your standards – but by our own. That means, for as long as this appeal lasts, I am in charge. Not you, not Masaka or Korgano. Me. My courtroom. My rulings. My schedule. Understood?"

Ihat's saurian features seemed pale and drawn, but his green eyes were bright and sharp.

"Message received," he said with a bird-like nod of his head. "I was confident you would not disappoint. And now, this parting gift from me. In acknowledgement of your bravery."

"Ihat, no," Danny said. "As a sitting judge, I can't accept—"

But, the being had already started spinning, his form fading into a translucent whirl, a gust of wind...

The spinning wind passed through the android and he felt himself grow uncomfortably warm, his pulse surging, his breath quickening until he fell to the carpeted floor, unconscious...

To Be Continued...
Chapter End Notes

References Include: TNG: The Offspring; Masks; Doctor Who: Enlightenment; Red Dwarf: The Inquisitor.

Your comments and reviews are always welcome! I've been working very hard on an original sci-fi novel, but I haven't forgotten this story or my other in-progress fanfics. Thanks so much for reading, and for your patience with my slow updates! :D

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!